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APRIL 1998

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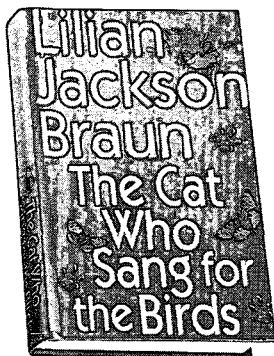


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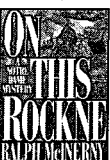
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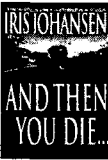


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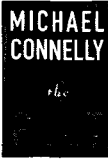
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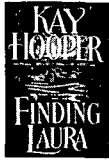
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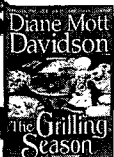
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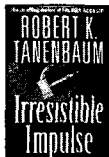
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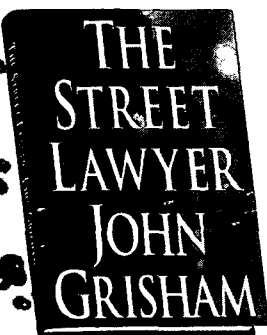
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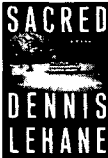
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

Series characters are always popular with readers, and there are three of them in this issue of AHMM.

Steve Lindley's "Hallway Dog" lets us in on the further doings of retired cop Kubiak and his wife Denise, last (first) seen in "Slow Thaw at Carlsen Bay," in our January 1996 issue on the occasion of their daughter's wedding. In "Hallway Dog" the Kubiaks have sold their house and are moving into a condo overlooking Lake Michigan, where their new neighbors include Maurice, a sort of golden retriever as independent as Kubiak himself.

Diane A. McGuire's "Nest of Eggs" is her eighth story featuring fourteen-year-old Herbie Sawyer, who lives with his mother on Cape Cod. Herbie's circle includes Detective Sergeant Jake Valari; Elmer Horton, an elderly signpainter; and

Herbie's girlfriend Meggie Charlton—all are present in this story, which takes place at Hooksham Academy, Meggie's school.

Herbie first turned up in AHMM in "Wicked Twist," October 1993, which won the Robert L. Fish Award, chosen by the Mystery Writers of America, for "Best First Mystery Short Story" of the year.

Ann Woodward's Lady Aoi, the principal character in "The Air of Day, the Air of Night," set in Japan in the early twelfth century, makes her seventeenth appearance in this issue. Ms. Woodward's stories for AHMM began in 1980 when Lady Aoi met "The Girl from Ishikawa." In the fall of 1996 Avon published a Lady Aoi novel, *The Exile Way*; a second novel, *Of Death and Black Rivers*, has a February 1998 publication date.

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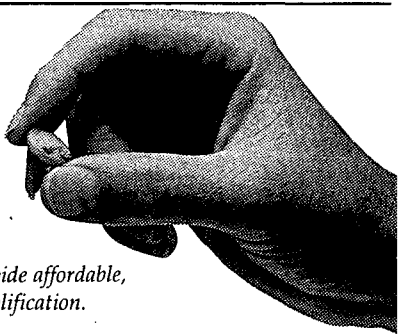
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TECHNOLOGY UPDATE

One scientist's vision revolutionizes the hearing industry, benefiting millions of people...

Crystal Ear® uses sophisticated electronics to provide affordable, cosmetically-pleasing and easy-to-use hearing amplification.



One day a friend asked my wife Jill if I had a hearing aid. "He certainly does," replied Jill. "Me!" After hearing about a remarkable new product, Jill finally got up the nerve to ask me if I'd ever thought about getting a hearing aid. "No way," I said. "It would make me look 20 years older and cost a fortune."

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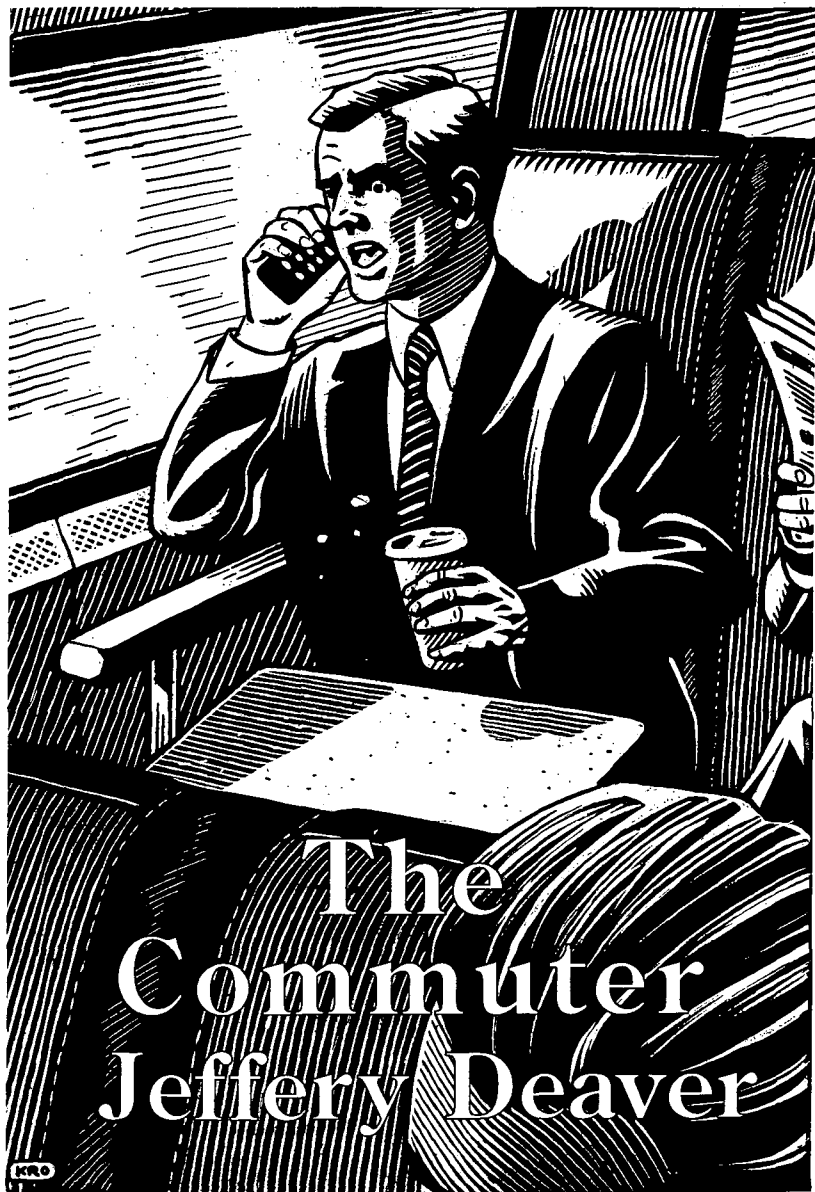


Illustration by Dan Krovatin

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 4/98

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Monday started out bad. Charles Monroe was on the 8:11 out of Greenwich, his usual train. He was juggling his briefcase and coffee—today tepid and burnt-tasting—as he pulled his cell phone out of his pocket to get a head start on his morning calls. It brayed loudly. The sound startled him, and he spilled a large comma of coffee on his tan suit slacks. “Goddamn,” Monroe whispered, flipping open the phone. He grumbled, “Lo?”

“Honey?”

His wife. He’d told her never to call on the cell phone unless it was an emergency.

“What is it?” he asked, rubbing the stain furiously as if the anger alone would make it vanish.

“Thank God I got you, Charlie.”

Hell, did he have another pair of trousers at the office? No. But he knew where he could get one.

The slacks slipped from his mind as he realized his wife had started crying. “Hey, Cath, settle down. What is it?” She irritated him in a lot of ways—her incessant volunteering for charities and schools, her buying bargain-basement clothes for herself, her nagging about his not coming home for dinner—but crying wasn’t one of her vices.

“They found another one,” Cathy said, sniffing.

She did, however, often talk as if he were supposed to know exactly what she meant.

“Who found another *what*?”

“Another body.”

Oh, that. In the past few months two residents had been murdered. The South Shore Killer, as a local rag had dubbed him, stabbed his victims to death and then eviscerated them with hunting knives. They were murdered for virtually no reason. One, following what seemed to be a minor traffic dispute. The other was killed because his dog wouldn’t stop barking.

“So?” Monroe asked.

“Honey,” Cathy said, catching her breath, “it was in Loudon.”

“That’s miles from us.”

His voice was dismissing, but Monroe in fact felt a faint chill. He drove through Loudon every morning on his way to the train station in Greenwich. Maybe he’d driven right past the corpse.

“But that makes three now!”

I can count, too, he thought. But said calmly, “Cath, honey, the odds’re a million to one he’s going to come after you. Just forget about it. I don’t see what you’re worried about.”

“You don’t see what I’m worried about?” she asked.

Apparently he didn’t. When he didn’t respond, she continued, “You. What do you think?”

“Me?”

“The victims have all been

men in their thirties. And they all lived near Greenwich."

"I can take care of myself," he said absently, gazing out the window at a line of schoolchildren waiting on a train platform. They were sullen. He wondered why they weren't looking forward to their outing in the city.

"You've been getting home so late, honey. I worry about you walking from the station to the car. I—"

"Cath, I'm really busy. Look at it this way: He seems to kill somebody once a month, right?"

"What?"

Monroe continued, "And he's just killed someone, so we can relax for another month."

"Is that . . . are you making a joke, Charlie?"

His voice rose. "Cathy, I really have to go. I don't have time for this."

A businesswoman in the seat in front of him turned and gave him an angry glance.

What's her problem?

Then he heard a voice. "Excuse me, sir?"

The businessman sitting next to him—an accountant or lawyer, Monroe guessed—was smiling ruefully at him.

"Yes?" Monroe asked.

"I'm sorry to say anything," he said. "But you're speaking pretty loud. Some of us are trying to read."

Monroe glanced at several

other commuters. Their irritated faces told him they felt the same.

He was in no mood for lectures. Everybody used cell phones on the train. When one rang, a dozen hands went for their phones.

"Sorry," Monroe grumbled, "but I was here first. You saw me on the phone and you sat down. Now, if you don't mind . . ."

The man blinked in surprise. "Well, I didn't mean anything. I was just wondering if you could speak a little more softly."

Monroe exhaled a frustrated sigh and turned back to his conversation. "Cath, just don't worry about it, okay? Now, listen, I need my monogrammed shirt for tomorrow."

The man gave him a piqued glance, sighed, and gathered up his newspaper and briefcase. He moved to the seat behind Monroe. Good riddance.

"Tomorrow?" Cathy asked.

Monroe didn't actually need the shirt, but he was irritated at Cathy for calling and he was irritated at the man next to him for being so rude. So he said, more loudly than he needed to, "I just said I have to have it for tomorrow."

"It's just kind of busy today. If you had said something last night . . ."

Silence.

"Okay," she continued, "I'll do

it. But, Charlie, promise you'll be careful tonight coming home."

"Yeah. Okay. Gotta go."

"Bye—"

He hit disconnect.

What a day, he thought. And punched in another number.

"Carmen Foret, please," he told the young woman who answered.

More commuters were getting on the train. Monroe tossed his briefcase on the seat next to him to discourage anybody else's sitting there.

A moment later the woman's voice answered.

"Hello?"

"Hey, baby, it's me."

A moment of silence.

"You were going to call me last night," the woman said coolly.

He'd known Carmen for eight months. She was, he'd heard, a talented real estate broker and was also, he supposed, a wonderful and generous woman in many ways. But what he *knew* about her—all he really cared to know—was that she had a soft, buoyant body and long cinnamon-colored hair that spread out on pillows like warm satin.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart, the meeting went a lot later than I thought."

"Your secretary didn't think it went all that late."

Hell. She'd called his office. She hardly ever did. Why last night?

"We went out for drinks after we revised the deal letter. Then we ended up at the Four Seasons. You know."

"I know," she said sourly.

He asked, "What're you doing at lunch today?"

"I'm doing a tuna salad sandwich, Charlie. What're you doing?"

"Meet me at your place."

"No, Charlie. Not today. I'm mad at you."

"Mad at me? 'Cause I missed one phone call?"

"No, 'cause you've missed about three hundred phone calls since we've been dating."

Dating? Where did she get that? She was his mistress. They slept together. They didn't date, they didn't go out, they didn't court and spark.

"You know how much money I can make on this deal. I couldn't mess up, honey." Hell. Mistake.

Carmen knew he called Cathy "honey." She didn't like it when he used the endearment with her.

"Well," she said frostily, "I'm busy at lunch. I may be busy for a lot of lunches. Maybe all the lunches for the rest of my life."

"Come on, babe."

Her laugh said nice try. But he wasn't pardoned for the "honey" glitch.

"Well, you mind if I come over and just pick up something?"

"Pick up something?" Carmen asked.

"A pair of slacks."

"You mean you just called me now because you wanted to pick up some laundry?"

"No, no, babe. I wanted to see you. I really did. When we were talking just now, I spilled some coffee on my slacks."

"Gotta go, Charlie."

"Babe—"

Click.

Damn.

Mondays, Monroe was thinking. I hate Mondays.

He called directory assistance and asked for the number of a jewelry store near Carmen's office. He charged a five hundred dollar pair of diamond earrings and arranged to have them delivered to her as soon as possible. The note read, "To my grade-A lover: A little something to go with your tuna salad. Charlie."

Eyes out the window. The train was close to the city now. The big mansions and the little wannabe mansions had given way to rowhouses and squat bungalows painted in hopeful pastels. Blue and red plastic toys and parts of toys sat in the balding back yards. A heavyset woman hanging out laundry paused and, frowning, watched the train speed past as if she were watching an airshow disaster clip on CNN.

He made another call. "Let me speak to Hank Shapiro."

A moment later a gruff voice came on the line. "Yeah?"

"Hey, Hank. It's Charlie. Monroe."

"Charlie, glad you called. How are we coming with our project?"

Monroe wasn't expecting the question quite this soon in the conversation. "Great," he said after a moment. "We're doing great."

"But?"

"But what?"

Shapiro said, "It sounds like you're trying to tell me something."

"No. . . . it's just that things are going a little slower than I thought. I wanted to—"

"Slower?" Shapiro asked.

"They're putting some of the information on a new computer system. It's a little harder to find than it used to be." He tried to joke. "You know those old-style floppy disks? They called them file folders?"

Shapiro barked, "I'm hearing 'little slower.' I'm hearing 'little harder.' That's not my problem. I need that information, and I need it soon."

The morning's irritations caught up with Monroe, and he whispered fiercely, "Listen, Hank, I have been at Johnson, Levine for years. Nobody has the insider information I do except Foxworth himself. So just

back off, okay? I'll get you what I promised."

Shapiro sighed. After a moment he asked, "You're sure he doesn't have any idea?"

"Who, Foxworth? He's completely in the dark."

A fast, irritating image of his boss flickered in Monroe's thoughts. Todd Foxworth was a large, quirky man. He'd built a huge ad agency from a small graphic design firm in SoHo. Monroe was a senior account executive and vice president. He'd risen about as far as he could in the company doing account work, but Foxworth had resisted Monroe's repeated suggestions that the agency create a special title for him. Tension hung between the men like a rotting plum, and over the past year Monroe had come to believe that Foxworth was persecuting him—continually complaining about his expense account, his sloppy record keeping, his unexplained absences from the office. Finally, when he'd gotten only a seven percent raise after his annual review, Monroe'd decided to retaliate. He'd gone to Hunter, Shapiro, Stein & Arthur and offered to sell insider client information. The idea troubled him at first, but then he figured it was just another way of collecting the twenty percent raise that he thought he was due.

Shapiro grumbled again, "I

can't wait much longer, Charlie. I don't see something soon, I may have to cut bait."

Crazy wives, rude commuters, now this. Jesus. What a morning.

"This info'll be grade-A gold, Hank."

"Better be. I sure as hell am paying for gold."

"I'll have some good stuff by this weekend. How 'bout you come up to my country place and you can look it over. It'll be nice and private."

"You got a country place?"

"I don't broadcast it. Fact is, well, Cathy doesn't know about it. A friend and I go up there sometimes . . ."

"A friend."

"Yeah. A friend. And she's got a girlfriend or two she could invite up if you wanted to come."

"Or two?"

Or three, Monroe thought but let it go.

A long silence. Then Shapiro chuckled.

"I think she could maybe just bring one friend, Charlie. I'm not a young man any more. Where is this place?"

Monroe gave him directions. Then he said, "How about dinner tonight? I'll take you to Chez Antibes."

Another chuckle. "I could live with that."

"Good. Eightish, then."

Monroe was tempted to ask

Shapiro to bring Jill, a young assistant account exec who worked at Shapiro's agency—and who also happened to be the woman he'd spent the evening with at the Holiday Inn last night when Carmen had been trying to track him down. But he thought, don't push your luck. He and Shapiro hung up.

Monroe closed his eyes and started to doze off, hoping to catch a few minutes' sleep. But the train lurched sideways, and he was jostled awake. He stared out the window. There were no houses to look at any more. Only sooty brick apartments. Monroe crossed his arms and rode the rest of the way to Grand Central Station in agitated silence.

The day improved quickly.

Carmen loved the earrings, and she came close to forgiving him (though he knew full restitution would involve an expensive dinner and a night at the Sherry Netherland).

In the office, Foxworth was in a surprisingly cheerful mood. Monroe had worried that the old man was going to grill him about a recent highly padded expense account. But not only did Foxworth approve it, he complimented Monroe for the fine job he'd done on the Brady Pharmaceutical pitch. He even offered him an afternoon of golf at Foxworth's exclusive country club on

Long Island next weekend. Monroe had contempt for golf and particular contempt for North Shore country clubs. But he toyed with the idea of taking Hank Shapiro golfing on Foxworth's tab. He dismissed the idea as too risky, although the thought amused him for much of the afternoon.

At seven o'clock—nearly time to leave to meet Shapiro—he suddenly remembered Cathy.

He called home. No answer. Then he dialed the school where she'd been volunteering recently and found that she hadn't come in today. He called home once more. Still she didn't pick up.

He was troubled for a moment. Not that he was worried about the South Shore Killer; he felt instinctively uneasy when his wife wasn't home—afraid that she might find him with Carmen or whoever. He was also reluctant for her to find out about his deal with Shapiro. The more money she knew he made, the more she'd want. He called once more and got their machine.

But then it was time to leave for dinner, and since Foxworth had left for the night, Monroe ordered a limo and put the expense down to general office charges. He drove downtown, sipping wine, and had a good dinner with Hank Shapiro. At

eleven P.M. he dropped Shapiro off at Penn Station, then took the limo to Grand Central. He caught the 11:30 to Greenwich, made it to his car without being stabbed by any knife-wielding crazy men, and drove home to peace and quiet. Cathy'd had two martinis and was fast asleep. Monroe watched a little TV, fell asleep on the couch, and slept late the next morning; he made the 8:11 with thirty seconds to spare.

At nine thirty Charlie Monroe strode into the office, thinking, Monday's over with, it's a new day. Let's get life moving again. He decided to spend the morning getting into the new computer system and printing out prospective client lists for Shapiro. Then he'd have a romantic lunch with Carmen. He'd also give Jill a call and charm her into drinks tonight.

Monroe had just stepped into his office when Todd Foxworth, even more cheerful than yesterday, waved to him and asked if they could have a chat. An ironic thought occurred to Monroe—that Foxworth had changed his mind and was going to give him a good raise after all. Would he still sell the confidential info? This was a dilemma. But he decided hell, yes. It'd make up for last year's insulting five percent raise.

Monroe sat down in Foxworth's cluttered office.

It was a joke in the office that Foxworth didn't exactly carry on a coherent conversation. He'd ramble, he'd digress, he'd even make up words occasionally. Clients found it charming. Monroe had no patience for it, but today he was in a generous mood and smiled politely as the rumpled old man chattered like a jay.

"Charlie, a couple of things. I'm afraid something's come up, and that invite for the golf this weekend? I know you'd probably like to hit some balls, were looking forward to it, but I'm afraid I've got to renege on the offer. Sorry, sorry."

"That's okay. I—"

"Good club, Hunter's is. You ever play there? No? They don't have a pool, no tennis courts, bad restaurant. You go there to play golf. You don't play golf, it's a waste of time. Of course then there's that dogleg on the seventeenth . . . Nasty, nasty, nasty. Never near par. Impossible. How long you been playing?"

"Since college. I really appreciate—"

"Here's the other thing, Charlie. Patty Kline and Sam Eggleston from our legal department, you know 'em. They were at Chez Antibes last night. Having dinner. Worked late and went to dinner there."

Monroe froze.

"Now, I've never been there, but I hear it's funny the way the restaurant's designed. They have these dividers, sort of like those screens in Japanese restaurants, only not Japanese screens of course because it's a French restaurant but they look sort of Japanese. But to make a long story short, they heard every word that you and Hank Shapiro said. So. There you have it. Security's cleaning out your desk right now, and there're a couple of guards on their way here to escort you off the property, and you better get yourself a good lawyer because theft of trade secrets—Patty and Sam tell me this; what do I know? I'm just a lowly wordsmith—is pretty damn serious. So. Guess I won't say good luck to you, Charlie. But I will say get the hell out of my agency. Oh, and by the way, I'm going to do everything I can to make sure you never work on Madison Avenue again. Bye."

Five minutes later he was on the street, briefcase in one hand, cell phone in the other. Watching boxes of his personal effects being loaded into a delivery truck destined for Connecticut.

He couldn't understand how it'd happened. Nobody from the agency ever went to Chez Antibes—it was owned by a corporation that competed with one of

Foxworth's big clients, and so it was off limits. Patty and Sam wouldn't have gone there unless Foxworth had told them to—to check up on Monroe. Somebody must've blown the whistle. His secretary? Monroe decided if it was Eileen he'd get even with her in a big way.

He walked for several blocks trying to decide what to do, and when nothing occurred to him, he took a cab to Grand Central.

Bundled in the train as it clacked north, speeding away from the gray city, Monroe sipped gin directly from the tiny bottle he'd bought in the club car. Numb, he stared at the grimy apartments, then at the pastel bungalows, then mini-estates, then the grand estates as the train sped north and east. Well, he'd pull something out of the situation. He was good at that. He was the best. A hustler, a salesman . . . He was grade-A.

He cracked the cap on the second bottle, and then the thought came to him: Cathy'd go back to work. She wouldn't want to. But she would. He'd talk her into it. The more he thought, the more the idea appealed to him. Damn it, she'd hung out around the house for years. It was his turn. Let her deal with the pressure of a nine to five job for a change. Why should he have to put up with all the crap?

Monroe parked in the driveway, paused, took several deep breaths, then walked into the house.

His wife was in the living room sitting in a rocking chair, holding a cup of tea.

"You're home early."

"Well, I've got to tell you something," he began, leaning against the mantel. He paused to let her get nervous, to rouse her sympathies. "There's been a big layoff at the agency. Foxworth wanted me to stay, but they just don't have the money. Most of the other senior people are going, too. It sounds scary, but this is really a good opportunity for both of us. It'll give you a chance to start teaching again. Just for a little while. I was thinking—"

"Sit down, Charles."

Charles? His mother called him Charles.

"I was saying, a chance—"

"Sit down. And be quiet."

He sat.

She sipped her tea with a steady hand, eyes scanning his face like searchlights. "I had a talk with Carmen this morning."

His neck hairs danced. He put a smart smile on his face and asked, "Carmen?"

"Your girlfriend."

"I—"

"You what?" Cathy snapped.

"Nothing."

"She seemed nice. It was a shame to upset her."

Monroe kneaded the arm of his Naugahyde chair.

Cathy continued, "I didn't plan to. Upset her, I mean. It's just that somehow she got the idea we were in the process of getting divorced." She gave a brief laugh. "Getting divorced because I'd fallen in love with the pool boy. Where'd she get an idea like that, I wonder?"

"I can explain—"

"We don't have a pool, Charles. Didn't it occur to you that that was a pretty stupid lie?"

Monroe's hands slipped together, and he began worrying a fingernail. He'd almost told Carmen that Cathy was having an affair with a neighbor or with a contractor. Pool boy was the first thing that came to mind. And, yes, afterwards he did think it was pretty stupid.

"Oh, if you're wondering," Cathy continued, "what happened was someone from the jewelry store called. They wanted to know whether to send the receipt here or to Carmen's apartment. By the way, she said the earrings were really tacky. But she's going to keep them anyway."

Why the hell had the clerk done that? When he'd called, he'd very explicitly said to send the receipt to the office.

"It's not what you think," he said.

"You're right, Charlie. I think it's probably a lot worse."

Monroe walked to the bar and poured himself another gin. His head ached, and he felt stuffy from too much liquor. He swallowed a mouthful and set the glass down. He remembered when they'd bought this set of crystal. A sale at Saks. He'd wanted to ask for the clerk's phone number, but Cathy had been standing nearby.

His wife took a deep breath. "I've been on the phone with a lawyer for three hours. He seemed to think it won't take much longer than that to make you a very poor man. Well, Charles, we don't have much more to talk about. So you should pack a suitcase and go stay somewhere else."

"Cath . . . this is a real bad time for me—"

"No, Charles, it *will* be bad. But it's not bad yet. Goodbye."

A half hour later he was finished packing. As he trudged down the stairs with a large suitcase, Cathy studied him carefully. It was the way she examined aphids as she spritzed them with bug spray and watched them curl into tiny dead balls.

"I—"

"Goodbye, Charles."

Monroe was halfway to the front hall when the doorbell rang. He set the suitcase down and opened the door. He found

two large sheriff's deputies standing in front of him. There were two squad cars in the driveway and two more deputies on the lawn. Their hands were very close to their pistols.

Oh no. Foxworth was pressing charges. Jesus. What a nightmare.

"Mr. Monroe?" the largest of the deputies asked, eyeing his suitcase. "Charles Monroe?"

"Yes..What is it?"

"I wonder if we could talk to you for a moment."

"Sure. I—what's the matter?"

"Can we come in?"

"I, well, sure."

"Where you going, sir?"

He suddenly realized that he didn't have a clue.

"I . . . I don't know."

"You're leaving, but you don't know where?"

"Domestic problem . . . I guess I'm going to the city. Manhattan."

Why not? It was as good a place as any.

"I see," one cop said and then glanced at his towering partner. "Out of state," he said significantly.

What did he mean by that?

The second deputy asked, "Is this your MasterCard number, Mr. Monroe?"

He looked at the slip the officer was holding out. "Um, yes, it is. What's this all about?"

"Did you place a mail order

yesterday with Great Northern Outdoor Supplies in Vermont?"

Great Northern? Monroe had never heard of them. He told the officers this. "I see," said the older cop, not believing him.

"You do own a house on Harguson Lake outside of Hartford, don't you?"

Again he felt the sizzling chill in his spine. Cathy was looking at him—with a look that said nothing would surprise her any longer. "I—"

"It's easy enough to check, sir. You may as well be honest."

"Yes, I do."

"When did you get it, Charles?" Cathy asked in a weary voice.

It was going to be a surprise . . . our anniversary . . . I was just about to tell you . . .

"Three years ago," he said.

The shorter of the deputies persisted, "And you didn't have an order sent by Great Northern via overnight delivery to the house on that property?"

"An order? No. What order?"

"A hunting knife."

"A knife? No, of course not."

"Mr. Monroe, the knife you ordered—"

"I didn't order any knives."

"—the knife ordered by someone *claiming* to be Charles Monroe and using your credit card and sent to your property was similar to the knives that've been used in those murders in the area."

The South Shore Killer . . .

"Charlie!" Cathy gasped.

"I don't know anything about any knives!" he cried. "*I don't!*"

"The state police got an anonymous tip about some bloody clothing at Harguson Lake. Turned out to be your property. A T-shirt from the victim two days ago. We also found another knife hidden near the T-shirt. Blood on it matches blood from the victim killed two months ago near Route 15."

God, what was going on?

"No! This is a mistake! I've never killed anyone."

"Oh, Charlie, how could you?"

"Mr. Monroe, you have the right to remain silent." The large deputy continued with the rest of the Miranda warning while the other slipped the cuffs on him.

They took his wallet from his pocket. His cell phone, too.

"No, no, let me have the phone! I get to make a call. I know I do."

"Yeah, but you have to use our phone, sir. Not yours."

They led him outside, fierce grips on his biceps. Struggling, panicky.

As they approached the squad car, Monroe happened to look up. Across the street was a slightly built man with sandy hair. A pleasant smile on his face, he leaned against a tree as he watched the excitement.

He seemed very familiar . . .

"Wait," Monroe cried. "Wait."

But the sheriff's deputies didn't wait. They firmly shepherd-ed Monroe into the back of their car and drove out of the driveway. It was as they passed the man and Monroe glanced at him from a different angle that he recognized him. It was the commuter—the one who'd sat next to him on the train yesterday morning. The rude one who'd asked him to be quiet.

Wait . . . oh no. No!

Monroe began to understand. This man had heard all his conversations—with Shapiro, with Carmen, the jewelry store. He'd taken down the names of everyone Monroe had been talking to, taken down his MasterCard number, the name and address of his mistress, the details of his meeting with Hank Shapiro . . . and the location of his house in the country! He'd called Foxworth, he'd called Cathy, he'd ordered the hunting knife . . .

And he'd called the police, too.

Because he was the South Shore Killer . . .

The man who murdered for the least affront—a fender bender, a barking dog.

With a wrenching gesture Monroe twisted around and saw the man gazing at the receding squad car.

"We have to go back!" Monroe shouted. "We have to! He's back there! The killer's back there!"

"Yes, sir, now if you'll just shut up, we'd appreciate it. We'll be at the station house in no time."

"No!" he wailed. "No, no, no!"

As he looked back one last time, he saw the man lift his hand to his head. What was he doing? Waving? Monroe squinted. No, he was . . . he was mimicking the gesture of holding a telephone to his ear.

"Stop! He's there! He's back there!"

"Sir, that'll be enough outa you," the large deputy said.

A block behind them, the commuter finally lowered his hand, turned away from the street, and started down the sidewalk, walking briskly in a contented lope.

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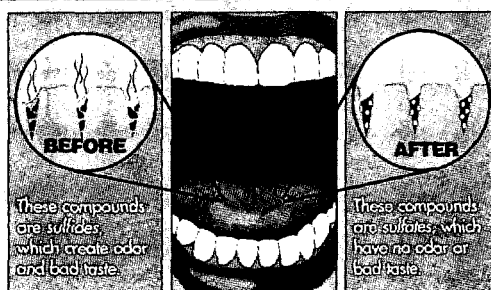
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FICTION

Hallway Dog

Steve Lindley



Illustration by James Moir

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 4/98

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So this was to be referred to as home, this simple maze of echoes, dust, and open doors.

Kubiak leaned against one of the stacks of cartons and stared through the plate glass window at Lake Michigan five stories below, trying to draw from it some sense of permanence. Nothing came.

That wasn't surprising. The situation was too common to call for poetry. Only daughter married off. A half-empty house on the northwest side traded even money for a view of the lake and a full-time maintenance crew. Practicality stamped on a brass ring, but not bad for a retired cop.

To hell with the poets.

A soft thump in the doorway to the outer hall pulled him away from the steady roll of the lake's surface. He turned, expecting the movers with yet another load, and saw the dog, a mix of golden retriever and something Kubiak couldn't classify but that showed itself mostly in its face, giving it too much hair on its muzzle and a wild set of eyebrows.

Kubiak stared at the dog, and the dog stared back at Kubiak, its tongue hanging, its tail offering a wave friendly enough to keep Kubiak from moving back behind the cartons. Then it took another three steps into the

apartment, turned, and disappeared into the hallway that led to the master bedroom, its nails tapping against the hardwood floor. Kubiak waited. A minute later the dog reappeared, made a round of the kitchen, then padded out the front door. Kubiak followed and from his doorway watched the mutt walk slowly to the freight elevator at the end of the hall. It stood there showing a mild interest in its surroundings until the elevator door opened.

The movers were in the elevator. There were three of them, two to do the heavy lifting, the third in charge of the headshakes and gripes. As they came out, the griper stopped to pat the dog on the head. The dog took the pats politely, then entered the elevator and sat down facing forward. The door slid shut.

"What the hell was that?" Kubiak asked, stepping aside for the two rolling Denise's dresser into the apartment.

"Looked to be a golden," the griper said, shuffling up behind them. He was smoking a cigarette, and a half inch of ash curling at its tip was about to drop somewhere.

"I'm quite aware of what he is. I was wondering what he's doing lounging in my elevator."

"Going down, I think."

"Kubiak," Denise said, putting her slice of pizza back in the box

and picking up her wineglass, "can we stop talking about the dog now?"

The table lamps had yet to be unpacked, and the harsh overheads made the room's corners stark, the bare windows sheets of black enamel. The dining room had been given over to the cartons, so he and his wife were sitting on the living room floor with the pizza box on the coffee table between them. In the kitchen, the clock radio was tuned low to an all-news station. The cable was due to be hooked up tomorrow.

"You're not concerned that we've moved into a building where animals roam the hallways with impunity?"

"The dog was lost. It probably came in with the movers and left the same way. I'm sure it's back home by now."

"No, he was having too good a time to do any home searching. And he wasn't wearing a collar. Lost dogs wear collars. That's how they become found dogs."

"You sound as though you're ready to be an active member of the Park Tower association."

Kubiak finished his beer, stood up to get another. His legs didn't want to straighten; he walked toward the kitchen with a slight hobble.

"It's the move affecting you," Denise said to his back. "A week ago if Fido had shown up on our

porch, you would have fed him steak. By the way, at what point in your relationship did you become aware that he's a him?"

"He's a happy dog. His tail stands straight."

"You should be ashamed of yourself."

"Can I help it if I spent most of the encounter behind the little snoop while he examined our apartment?"

"Condo, Kubiak. Get used to the word."

Kubiak opened a fresh can of Old Style, drank, turned up the radio. "I only hope Fido's owner isn't as curious as his dog."

The welcoming committee arrived just after seven the next morning. Denise was asleep. Kubiak was going through cartons searching for the coffee-maker when the rap on the door made him jump. He secured his terry cloth robe and opened the door to four beaming, veined, and powdered ladies in bows and pressed blouses. The roundest of them stood well in front of the others, holding a thick notebook against her bosom. She introduced herself as Margaret Hart, secretary/treasurer of the Park Tower condominium association.

"You must be looking for my wife," Kubiak said. "I'll wake her."

Smiles faded. Margaret Hart turned to the women behind her, one of whom checked her watch. Another was peering past Kubiak at the apartment's furnishings. The third was staring at Kubiak's bare feet.

"We could come back this afternoon if that would be more convenient."

"Oh no," Kubiak told her. "I wouldn't think of it."

He had his coffee in a bakery off Belmont. The girl behind the counter was pleasant enough, letting him take his time over the *Tribune*. He skimmed the articles, not fully digesting their contents, wondered what old Jan, who worked the Cinnamon Cafe on Milwaukee, would have to say about today's Royko. Jan loathed Royko, read only bitterness in his columns. Naturally, it was her lack of a sense of humor that her morning regulars found so amusing.

When Kubiak realized he was looking up from the paper every time the bakery's door jingled, he folded the *Tribune* and paid for the coffee, leaving a tip big enough to ensure the counter girl would remember his face in case he decided to return tomorrow.

The morning was misty, and the first cool of the coming autumn combined with the moisture to blush Kubiak's cheeks

and knuckles. He walked the neighborhood and beyond the neighborhood, trying to draw map lines in his head, determine which streets were now his backyard and which were not, though there was nothing on any of them he wanted to claim. One row of storefronts appeared too rundown. Another worked too hard at looking chic. He studied the window dressings in the three-flats and made guesses about how the people who lived behind them spent their evenings. He found a tavern that reminded him of Lucky's, sat silent among the old men cupped over their scotch, ate a dry ham sandwich, washed it down with flat tap beer, and left quietly, aching with that peculiar sense of isolation one can feel only in the company of others.

At least he was alone on the beach. Hands in his pockets, his jacket collar turned up against the damp, he made his way slowly along the line of highrises on the other side of The Drive, heading back toward Park Tower. As he approached that section of sand he had been looking out upon the previous afternoon, he saw his first familiar face of the day. Fido, eyebrows and all, was trotting back from the water's edge. Kubiak whistled, but the dog ignored him, continuing up the beach to the grassline where a woman was sitting in a

wheelchair, staring out at the lake.

"What's his name?" Kubiak called out, aiming himself in her direction with a deliberately casual gait.

She didn't turn her head. Her thin shoulders were hunched so that in order to see the water she had to bend her neck in a manner that looked painful. The size of her nose and ears in proportion to the shrunken flesh on her face told her age, and the weight of the chair, with its clean chrome wheels and heavy metal footrests, made her seem even frailer.

"Who?" she asked.

Fido circled the wheelchair, then sat beside it, rested his muzzle in the old woman's lap, dropping caked sand onto the small, striped, red, white, and blue blanket covering her thighs.

"The dog."

"I don't know. He doesn't belong to me." She patted the dog's head with a hand that trembled severely. "I call him Maurice, but he won't answer to it."

"Who does he belong to?"

"Nobody, really. He likes to spend mornings at the beach. The rest of the time he's inside."

"Inside?"

"The building. Where we live."

Kubiak looked up at Park Tower, noticed a younger woman with a pageboy haircut sitting on a bench not far away. She must

have just noticed Kubiak at the same time because, as their eyes met, she stood, closed the paperback book she had been reading, and dropped it into a large cloth bag at her feet.

She looked over her shoulder nervously, then back at Kubiak, picked up the bag, and began walking toward them.

"We?"

"Me and Maurice."

"What's your name?"

"Pamela. But I think I'm going home now."

The young woman had reached them. Kubiak's hello was ignored. She grasped the back of the chair, kicked the wheel lock free, and swung the old lady away, carrying her quickly and roughly up through the park, Pamela's head and elbows bobbing.

Kubiak watched them go, wondering if Pamela enjoyed the ride or was too weak to protest. Daughter or caretaker? The young girl certainly was a nervous Nellie.

Fido, a.k.a. Maurice, was gone. Kubiak was alone again. The beach was empty except for two young men in nylon jackets jogging through the sand. Tourists.

One of them had a camera hanging from his neck. Kubiak looked back up at his building, counted up to the fifth story, and tried to locate his apartment window.

"Hey, jerky."

Nice. He supposed he ought to wave.

"Yo. Sneaker man."

Kubiak stared down at his feet.

A hell of a thing to jog with a camera bouncing against your chest.

They were on him before he could turn, the tall, dark-haired one with the camera putting a bear hug on his chest, spinning him around to face the stocky one. Arms moving under his jacket, down around his hips. His pockets being turned inside out.

"Where do I know you from, jerky?" the stocky one asked.

His hair was bright red, soft, wavy. His mouth was busy talking and chewing gum, but the spark in his eyes told Kubiak he was enjoying himself. The tall one, having finished his work, moved back beside his friend.

"No I.D. Just a roll of fives and singles."

"I'm asking you, why do you look so familiar to me?"

"I couldn't imagine," Kubiak said, replanting his feet and adjusting his trousers.

"No? I can. You live around here?"

"I'm from the northwest side."

"So what are you doing here? Taking in the neighborhood?"

"You must be part psychic."

"I am. Maybe that's how I

know you. I saw your face in a vision. What's your name?"

"Maurice."

The two men exchanged glances.

"You want to try again?"

"Fido?"

"That sounds closer. Better take it now, Albert."

The dark-haired one raised the camera to his face. It was a Polaroid, Kubiak noticed, and he was still staring at the spot that had flashed when red hair's chunky knuckles landed in that tender spot between his left eye and the bridge of his nose. The sand on his back was soft, the knee against his chest sharp. Red's breath smelled of spearmint. "Fido, you know that if I recognize you I can find you. That makes me your only friend and savior. Think about it."

Kubiak listened to their footsteps fade. He raised his hand to wipe the blood from his nose but succeeded only in adding sand to the mess.

"I don't want to hear about it."

Denise was smoking a Virginia Slims menthol. He hadn't seen her with a cigarette since last call at their daughter's wedding reception.

"This move is affecting you," he told her.

"You wake me out of a sound sleep with a whisper in my ear

that there's a surprise for me in the kitchen, then disappear into the bathroom. How could you do that to us?"

"Us?"

"They're convinced we're nudists, Kubiak. That look never left those ladies' eyes. And even if, by some slim chance, the entire very long morning I spent calming and charming them might have changed their minds, not five minutes after they're gone you waltz past the doorman wearing a face full of blood and sand. How much did you drink today?"

"I had a beer. And I didn't pass the doorman. I came up through the garage. The only one who saw me was that Margaret something or other. There seems to be no escaping her."

The closest thing to Denise's hand was a roll of paper towels. Kubiak deflected it with the red-spotted handkerchief he was holding.

"Toro."

It was the last word she would respond to that day.

The cable men still hadn't shown. Kubiak rose from the couch, sneaked into the shower, left a note beside the pack of smokes on the bedstand asking Denise to please not burn down the apartment until they could place a bid on their old house. He rode the elevator to the garage,

drove the Buick west to Milwaukee, continued on until he could smell cinnamon. Jan asked him what had happened to his eye, he ordered an éclair, and then somebody brought up Royko.

He lingered around the neighborhood, didn't reach 1121 South State until midafternoon. Crawford was at his desk, talking on the phone. He cupped the mouthpiece long enough to ask Kubiak about the eye but not long enough to get an answer, finished his conversation, and sat back to listen.

"They had to be us, working surveillance on an Alzheimer's grandma name of Pamela something who lives in Park Tower."

"I don't know nothing about it, Kubiak."

"It couldn't take too much effort to find out. The one scratching for his gold star is a carrot-top, five eight, right around one eighty, likes to talk tough and chews Wrigley's spearmint. His partner's dark, six foot, lanky, easy but efficient. Answers to Albert."

"And what is it you want to know?"

"Just why talking to this old woman on the beach gets you beat up. My number hasn't changed. I should be home all day."

"All day. Must be sweet, that retirement."

"A walk in the park."

On the drive back to his building Kubiak stopped at Zanie's Camera on Wabash and bought a pair of binoculars.

The cable man was drilling a hole through the living room wall. The blinds were up. The late morning sunlight was coming in through them. Kubiak was sitting in a chair at the window. The binoculars had been a bargain, their lenses powerful.

"He likes to watch the sailboats," Denise told Margaret, who was sitting at the dining room table Kubiak had cleared of boxes the previous evening. Denise was wearing clothing and preparing tea and sweets, along with, Kubiak supposed, champagne and uncut diamonds if her guest were to request them.

"Margaret," Kubiak said, lowering the binoculars, "what do you know about an old woman who lives here in the building named Pamela?"

"I think we have several Pamelas," Margaret said. "Why?"

"This one's in a wheelchair. She gets rolled out onto the beach. Talks to a dog she calls Maurice. A golden."

"That dog. The hallway dog."

"You know of it."

"All too well. Last July I sent a notice to each of the residents warning that if any of them continue to feed it or take it in

they'll be fined two hundred dollars by the association."

"No kidding. You can do that?"

"It's in your contract. No one knows where the dog came from. It has no tags. It could be carrying a disease."

"Rabies," Kubiak said, making a face at his wife.

"Who would be responsible if it were to attack someone?" Denise asked.

"It wanders the building at will. God only knows where it makes its mess."

"Pays no maintenance fees. Here she is. Margaret, come quick."

The lady sprang from her chair and shuffled to the window with a speed Kubiak hadn't expected. Five stories down the young girl with the pageboy cut was wheeling the chair down to the grassline. Though the late morning was warm, the old woman was braced against the breeze in a sweater, sweatpants, and the striped blanket, and for a second Kubiak's own future flashed between the binoculars' lenses. Old man Kubiak, a shivering sack of brittle bones, being carried down to the water by his wife, muttering tales of longing for his days on the northwest side to the fishes while Denise sat on a bench reading magazines.

The image disappeared as Margaret snatched the binocu-

lars from his face and raised them to her eyes.

"Of course. That's Pamela Galloway in 319. Poor thing. Always hated the beach."

"Does the young lady placing her on it realize that?"

"Oh, she tells them, but they think she's only whining. The sickness and all."

"Them?"

"Christian Sisters to the Infirmary. Such sweet girls. They're all she has since her rat of a granddaughter moved out. Pamela took her in years ago when Karen lost her first job and couldn't pay her rent. She blamed herself, of course, for Karen's being so alone. The girl never had a father."

"Or a mother?"

"Cancer. Pamela did the best she could with Karen, but there's no taking the animal out of some. When the Parkinson's began to get really bad and Karen found herself doing more caring than being cared for, she left. Moved in with her boyfriend Jimmy. Another rat."

"Is she still here in the city?"

"Yes, though you wouldn't know it from the few-and-far-between visits to her grandmother. She works right up on Clark. She's a ... cocktail waitress."

Kubiak nodded his sympathies in response to the wrinkling of Margaret's nose.

"Marty G.'s Sports Bar. A real rat's nest."

"Indeed."

"Well, I only know from driving past. You can just tell from the window."

Kubiak raised an eyebrow. Margaret giggled like a teenager.

"Oh, Mr. Kubiak."

She slapped his forearm and giggled again.

In the dining room the ignored hostess snorted into her teacup. Kubiak gave up his chair to Margaret and pocketed two finger-cookies for the road.

The Christian Sisters worked out of an office three blocks from Illinois Masonic, one flight down from the street. Lunch hour was still winding up; there was only one woman left in the office to juggle the phones and Kubiak. Through the narrow window above her head Kubiak could see people's shoes moving past the wheels of a parked minivan.

"You want to complain to the volunteer about what?"

"The beach," Kubiak said. "Mrs. Galloway doesn't like the beach. But there she is, being dragged out there every afternoon like a dead alewife. Poor thing."

The woman tapped something into her computer. Tapped something else. Tapped something else.

"If you have a problem about her care, I'm afraid you'll have to take it up with her family. We have not seen Mrs. Galloway since her Medicare provider notified us that our services were no longer necessary."

"When was that?"

"One week ago last Monday," she said, looking up from the terminal. "She's in the care of a relative."

"You must be Marty."

"If I was Marty, would I be working behind Marty's bar?" Three stools down, someone snickered. "No. I'd be out at Arlington losing my ass so I could come back here and bitch all night about liquor costs. Am I right?"

Six nineteen-inch television screens parked high at odd angles declared the small tavern an official sports bar. Only the sets displaying *Jeopardy!* had their volume turned up. Kubiak took off the baseball cap he'd bought at the Marathon down the block, the one kitty-corner to the cash station, and sipped his bourbon.

A half hour later he'd worked through enough conversation to buy the two men on the stools to his left a round of drinks.

"Is Karen on tonight?"

The bartender shook his head. "What's with you guys and Karen?"

"I'm a little old for that, don't you think?"

"I think you're the only one knows it. Karen hasn't worked here for a couple of weeks now."

"Why am I guessing she didn't quit?"

"You don't show up for a Saturday night shift, who's to say? But she didn't come back begging."

"That's too bad. Actually, it's her boyfriend Jimmy I'm looking for."

"Oh?"

"I'm holding his money. He gave me a sawbuck to lay on a trifecta, and it hit. Go figure."

Kubiak pulled the roll of bills from his pants pocket. A hundred dollar bill was showing. He folded it back to show another.

"All of a sudden Jimmy can't crawl to his OTB?"

"Not ponies. Greyhounds. I met him through Karen, and now I don't know where to get hold of him."

"Like you said, that's too bad."

"Come on, Mike," the man to Kubiak's left said. "The guy's honest enough to carry Jimmy's money."

It cost him another round of drinks, but Kubiak left with an address.

The building was on Winona, far enough west of the lake to make Kubiak nervous about leaving his car on the street. He

got Jimmy Cogan's surname from the slip of paper shoved into the hole beside the buzzer. A male voice that sounded vaguely familiar came over the intercom; Kubiak introduced himself as a friend of Karen's grandmother. He was buzzed in and walked up two dark flights that smelled stale and resonated from the bass of stereos playing behind closed doors.

Jimmy's apartment was halfway down the hall. Its door stood open. Kubiak stepped inside.

"You didn't really think you'd find him here, did you?"

Red was sitting in a hardback chair on the other side of the room, facing the doorway. "If it was that easy, we never would of met."

He stood, extended a hand, took two paces forward. Kubiak took one back.

"I know. I'm sorry. Kubiak, right? Latent prints. I told you I knew your face. Pat Waters. I hear you've been asking around about me."

Kubiak had yet to close the door. He made a quick survey of the sadly furnished room.

"Where's Albert?"

"Somebody had to stay staked out on the beach while I chased you around the north side. When you didn't come out of Marty G's after an hour, I knew you'd wind up here. By now you must have

figured out what we were up to yesterday."

"Who was the girl on the bench?"

"She's ours. Can't have some jerky nursie bouncing around in the middle of a sting. Look at what happened to you. Hey, I said I was sorry. I thought Jimmy'd sent you."

After the door was closed, they sat in folding chairs at a torn vinyl card table by the window. "Jimmy Cogan's a scammer. I've known him since he worked out of Rogers Park years ago," Waters said, lighting a cigarette. "The first day I set eyes on his little girlfriend I knew he'd wind up putting her to good use."

"Karen."

"She's not a bad looker if she makes herself up slutty enough. She spends her nights walking her legs up to old boozehounds and handing them another drink they don't need, along with a wink. Jimmy sits and drinks with them. It's his job to know which of them are whittling through an empty wallet and which aren't."

Waters blew out a smoke ring and cracked his gum. "Last April they hit the mother lode: A jerky who if I used his name you just might know it was taking his young date slumming so his wife could have a pleasant evening alone, and Karen was

his waitress. He showed again the next night without the date. This was when Karen was still working downtown. She got canned, moved to Marty G.'s, and the old jerky followed his tongue all the way up Clark Street. She played him for five months of sincere good loving until two weeks ago when she showed up at six in the morning at the front door of his Evanston townhouse with a horrible story about her mother running into trouble in Vegas and in need of twenty thousand as of that day."

"Never mind her mother's dead."

"How's jerky to know that when Karen's been feeding him the story about Mom's gambling problem for weeks already? And at that moment all he's aware of is that his wife is asleep upstairs while his mistress is weeping into his pajama cuffs, holding what appears to be a one-way ticket to Vegas on American for that morning. He offers to call the casino, pull some strings. She says who sweats when it's just a casino involved? She keeps her hysterics at just the right volume to keep from waking the wife but to carry him into First Chicago the minute it opens. The last he saw of her, she was kissing his cheek on the upper level outside of Terminal Three. Not enough time between the bank's opening and the flight's ten A.M.

departure to park the car and see her to the gate. Slick."

"She never got on the plane."

"She couldn't if she wanted to. American doesn't have a ten A.M. flight for Vegas out of O'Hare."

The phone rang. Though it was somewhere at the other end of the apartment, it sounded unnaturally loud. Both Kubiak and Waters turned their heads to the hallway, then back at each other. The phone rang again.

"Somebody thinks Jimmy's still here," Waters said.

"You going to find out who?"

Halfway through the third ring it stopped. "All right," Kubiak said. "Twenty thousand dollars isn't the score of a lifetime, so the chances are they're both still around, but what makes you think Karen's so anxious to spread the word of her good fortune to her grandmother on the beach?"

"The old broad's very sick, guaranteed to be in her grave before the week's end."

Waters chuckled, stubbed out his cigarette on the thin carpet. "Relax, Kubiak. I know you're her bestest friend. It's just the word we put on the street. Jimmy won't believe it, but I'm betting Karen will want to whisper goodbye, and she's smart enough not to try to get past Park Tower's front desk. She knows grandma's out there between eleven and one every day. All I'm asking

you to do is keep from walking your dog in the park for a little while."

"He's not my dog."

"Whatever. But stay off the beach until we pick Karen up, huh?"

He wanted to drive alone with the windows down, the stereo on and Waters' words playing in his head, maybe make a quick run to the neighborhood for a couple of beers at Lucky's. But it was rush hour. Foster was backed up and he had to concentrate too hard on traffic to think about anything else, so he turned south on Western and headed back to Park Tower, rolled down the ramp to the underground garage, and pulled into his designated parking space.

Though it was dirty, slow, and located in a darker area of the garage, the freight elevator was closer to both Kubiak's parking spot and his apartment door than was the main elevator. Kubiak pressed its thick black call button, listened to the creak and hum start up in the shaft, picked up on another sound, faint, coming from somewhere behind him. A sound like an old woman softly whining.

He stared out to his right past the yellow-lined loading zone. A row of support posts ran parallel to the gray concrete wall. Between them was a neat line of

front bumpers. Shadow, light, shadow. Kubiak took two steps back from the door, crouched, saw no one sitting inside the first few cars.

The elevator door rumbled open. Kubiak waited for it to close again, and all was silent except for the hum of a flickering fluorescent and the muted whimper of someone in solitary pain.

He followed the sound, or the echoes of it, he couldn't be sure, moving quietly, slowly, behind the cars, stopped behind a Ford Explorer that was leaking fluid. The whining ended then, replaced by shallow breaths that were coming from underneath the Ford. Kubiak bent, touched the tip of his finger to the fluid. Sticky, it wasn't coming from the truck.

On his hands and knees he peered underneath the Ford, into a pair of frightened eyes that glowed back at him.

"Jesus, Maurice. What did they do to you?"

The waiting room was busy with the after-work crowd keeping their pets close to their heels, but no one seemed indignant when the veterinary assistant ushered the man carrying the golden retriever in ahead of them.

Maurice was scooped away in-

to the back, and Kubiak was left to wait alone in the tiny examination room while the blood on his shirt dried. He spent another forty-five minutes nursing his own wounds, the nips Maurice had put on his wrists during the extraction from underneath the truck, and pondering over what he had said to Margaret about rabies, and was in the act of borrowing a bit of gauze and tape from the shelf over the sink when the vet came back into the room.

"Only one leg was broken. A couple of bruised ribs. He wasn't really cut up much at all, only needed seven stitches. Accidents with cars, things usually look much worse than they actually are."

"So you're figuring that's what it was."

"You said you found him in the garage."

"Yes, but I didn't say how he wound up there."

The vet looked up from his clipboard. He had a beard, round glasses, and a thin, sad face that reflected the tender woes of the domesticated animals that came through his door. "Goldens are sweet dogs," he said. "But would you go up against one armed with nothing but a lead pipe?"

"Only if I had to."

"Hmm." Back to the clipboard. "We gave him a bath."

"That's nice."

"And you might think about keeping him on a leash."

"I couldn't do that."

"No?"

"He's not my dog."

"That might be the case, but you are the one who brought him in here. You're the one who requested treatment as opposed to . . ."

"To . . .?"

He looked up from the clipboard again, looking even sadder.

Kubiak rubbed his palms together. "So, where is my Maurice?"

"Ready and raring to go."

At the checkout desk Maurice was straining at the end of his new leash, his nose aimed at a pug who wasn't interested in making friends. His right flank had been shaved, and his left front leg was in a cast. Tape wrapped his torso. The chubby, happy, high school girl holding him back handed Kubiak the bill along with a set of gold tags. Kubiak handed her what he had pulled from the cash station that afternoon, along with his MasterCard. "Maurice," she said as the printer spat out the receipt. "What an interesting name. How did he wind up with it?"

"Hell if I know."

Ten fifty the next morning, Kubiak pulled his chair to the window, took the binoculars out

of their case. Maurice hobbled across the room and sat beside him, interested in his interest. He had spent the earlier part of the morning exploring the apartment in detail. Kubiak patted him on the head, and Maurice let his mouth fall open, tongue hanging out.

"Oh, to be a dog. To hold no grudges."

"Since when do you, oh kind savior of the infirm?"

The new tenant had raised Denise's spirits. Kubiak had even caught her singing while making up the bed.

"I owe somebody a shot in the eye. It's obsessing me."

"That can't be Margaret. Not since you two have become the best of friends."

"The bestest, jerky."

"Sharing mutual interests. Gossip. Spying."

"If it bothers you any, just take to answering the door in the nude."

The phone rang. Denise answered, carried the handset to Kubiak. "It's Crawford."

"Pat Waters and Albert Nagle," Crawford said after a loud slurp of liquid. Kubiak pictured a waxed paper cup and coffee the color of cream. "Been working out of Area Three since '94. The way you were talking, I was expecting some Batman and Robin, but they're just a couple of suits buried in the mire."

"Stuck in bunco. It's what they're working here."

"If you say so."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning nobody I talked with knew about any case assignment involving any of the names you gave me last night."

"Pamela and Karen Galloway."

"Jimmy Cogan. I wrote them down, Kubiak. I'm telling you, there is no case."

"Oh. Well then, I suppose I didn't run into Waters and Nagle on the beach the day before yesterday after all."

"I guess not. So, how'd you get your black eye?"

"Tripped over a dog. You think I look bad, you ought to get a gander at him."

"Now you want to tell me what it is about this Pamela Galloway that might interest a couple of off-duty detectives?"

"Soon as I see her."

Kubiak pressed the off button, laid the handset in his lap, picked up the binoculars, and settled in. At eleven fifteen Maurice grew bored and limped off toward the bedroom. At eleven twenty-seven a young woman in Spandex holding tiny hand weights power-walked across the beach. After that, nothing. No mock Christian sister. No wheelchair. No off-duty Chicago detectives. Just the steady wash of waves over sand.

He waited until noon before he put the binoculars away and slid the chair back under the table. Maurice, evidently waking at the noise, appeared in the hallway.

"Wait here, Rin Tin Tin."

Kubiak went to the freight elevator, pressed three, wandered around corners until he found unit 319. He couldn't miss it. Margaret was standing in the hallway, as were a half dozen other curious building residents. Pressing past them and peering through the open door, he could see a cluster of blue uniforms, a couple of paramedics dressed in white and two detectives whose names he knew wearing nylon jackets.

He had to stand on his toes to see Pamela because she was lying on the floor. She was dressed warmly in her sweater and sweats, prepared for just another afternoon at the beach. She was between her wheelchair and a wrought-iron endtable, and she was lying face down, and the paramedics were standing nowhere near her.

Nagle spotted Kubiak first, tapped Waters on the elbow. Waters muttered something to end the conversation he'd been having with the officer beside him. Then he and Nagle caught hold of Kubiak's arms and ushered him to the end of the hall, away from the rest of the gawking con-

do owners, whose attention now turned to the newest resident.

"You're not going to take my picture again, are you?" Kubiak asked. "I'll look like a raccoon."

"This isn't funny, Kubiak."

"I'll second that. You're psychic, Waters. Your story about the old lady's imminent death came true. Who called it in?"

The two detectives looked at one another.

"We did, if it makes you feel any better."

"A little safer, depending on how long you three stood on the beach discussing your options."

"What does that mean?"

"Let's see. Your girl shows up at eleven o'clock, as scheduled, to bring Mrs. Galloway downstairs. She finds the body, runs down to tell you. . . . By the way, you told me she was one of us, but I don't see her here, and she acted way too nervous on the beach to be a cop. Who is she?"

Another shared glance.

"Albert's cousin."

"Oh," Kubiak said, showing his palms. "You two really know how to dig yourselves deep. You bring in family on your lunch break to work a nonexistent sting on the granddaughter of a woman you just called in dead."

"I know it looks bad."

"It looks like another department scandal."

Waters pulled a Kleenex from his pocket, tucked away his gum,

tore open a fresh stick. Nagle, after a glance over his shoulder, filled in the silence.

"We began this thing on the clock," he said. "The mark was hot as hell when he found out that the flight Karen supposedly left on didn't exist. He got stupid about it, sent out feelers to some friends of his in the Evanston P.D. to see if he could get his money back quietly. When word trickled down to us, and Pat recognized Karen's name, he offered our services."

"We were only on it a day and a half," Waters said, "before the jerky had second thoughts. He showed up with his lawyer, denied the scam ever happened. Said it was a misunderstanding."

"But that wasn't enough to stop you."

"I don't like Jimmy Cogan. Never did. And I don't have much sympathy for married jerkies who get themselves conned out of twenty grand by their cocktail waitresses."

"We figured," Nagle said, "if we could get hold of Karen and the money she'd turn over Jimmy, and we wouldn't need the mark. If it did hit the papers, so be it."

"Batman and Robin," Kubiak said. "Now that the adventure's over, what do you two plan on doing by way of making a living?"

"We start by picking up Jimmy."

"What, are you on a mission?"

"The old broad didn't just happen to fall out of her chair, Kubiak," Nagle said. "There are two cracks on her skull, one in the back, one on the front. The front looks to have come from the edge of the endtable when she went down."

"The other was from maybe being whacked by the phone receiver," Waters added. "It's an old rotary, was on the table beside her, and was wiped bone clean. That means either Karen or Jimmy was up here. I want to know which one, but I'm hoping it's Jimmy. And I'm hoping you'll sit on this for twenty-four hours until we can find him."

"You haven't been able to manage that over two weeks' time. What makes you think twenty-four hours will make a difference?"

Waters looked back at the crowd staring at the three of them. "Only that it's probably all we got."

"I almost feel sorry for them."

"Them. Them?"

Denise had lit candles.

Each piece of furniture was in its proper place, all the cardboard boxes were gone. The apartment looked about as complete, Kubiak imagined, as it ever would.

"Waters and Nagle. They thought they finally had their hands around Jimmy Cogan's neck. Not that they wanted his neck. They were after the money all along, probably still are. With everyone washing their hands of Jimmy's scam, all they had to do was find him, threaten arrest, and take the payoff. Everybody was supposed to walk away silent and happy."

"Except poor Mrs. Galloway."

"Well, yes."

They were sitting on the couch, Maurice stretched asleep at their feet. The television was glowing out a cable station, but its volume was turned down. A CD was playing softly on the stereo.

"Two floors down," Denise said.

"Yes."

Kubiak didn't have to close his eyes to picture the crowd in front of his own open door, the details of his demise excitedly passed among the ladies of the condo association.

"Where are you going to go when I'm dead?"

"Don't change the subject," she said.

"I'm not. We're talking about death."

"Yours?" Denise squeezed his hand a little tighter. "Why? Which one of our old friends, or new for that matter, is planning to off you?"

"I can think of a couple. But let's say Maurice turns on me tonight. Rips out his master's voice. Where will you be?"

"Right here," she said after a moment.

"Last stop."

"The widow Kubiak. Entertaining all gentlemen callers."

"In hats, and wool suits too big. Roses in one hand, the door knocker in the other."

"Lucky me. Take a number, boys."

The candles' light played in the room's corners. Kubiak stood up, disturbing Maurice, and went into the kitchen for a fresh beer.

"How's your wine holding up, Scarlett?" he called out, but not loud enough. He came out of the kitchen to ask again and stopped in the doorway. Maurice was resting his muzzle on Denise's lap, and she was absently patting him on the head.

"What is it?" Denise asked.

He said nothing, stood staring at the dog's head in her lap.

"Kubiak, I know that look. You're about to do something stupid."

He took Maurice, a penlight, and a roll of electrical tape down to the garage, locked the dog in the Buick, went back to the area around the freight elevator. The blood had yet to be

hosed away. So much for maintenance fees.

Using the penlight, Kubiak was able to locate each drop of blood Maurice had left on the concrete floor. He marked them with the tape, stood back, and determined that the vet had probably been correct. If a car had been pulled into the loading zone nose first, backed out fast into a hard right, it could have caught Maurice in its left front wheel well and dragged him directly to the spot behind the Ford Explorer under which Kubiak had found him.

Provided Maurice had been standing beside the driver's door.

He called the elevator and rode it up to seven.

Margaret opened the door to 704 only as far as the chain would take it. She was wearing a robe over her nightgown, and there was a smudge of chicken salad on her chin.

"I need to get into 319," he told her.

"Why, what makes you think I could—"

"The association holds a master to every unit in case of emergency. It's in my contract."

Her slippers flapped against her heels as she led Kubiak to Pamela Galloway's unit.

"It must be fascinating to spend a lifetime in such a line of work," she said, unlocking the

door. The lilt in her voice was forced. Kubiak might not have noticed if he hadn't caught a glimpse of the wariness in her eyes.

"A thrill a minute."

"The things you must see."

"And those you don't," he said, pushing past her. "Thank you, Margaret."

He closed the door on her words, waited until she was gone, unlocked the door, left, returned with Maurice. The golden didn't waste much time surveying the apartment; Kubiak guessed he already knew it well enough. A line of dogfood cans in Pamela's kitchen cabinet confirmed it.

"A regular visitor, eh?"

Maurice's tail gave two waves.

The apartment's furniture was old, dark, solid. Photographs in tiny frames were everywhere, the decades in which they were taken declared by the background, the clothing, the cut of the hair. So many faces.

A fine layer of dust on the shelves and tabletops revealed to Kubiak all the items that had been shuffled from one spot to another and put back slightly askew. The speaker covers of an old fashioned record console had been pried loose recently, and pressed flush again.

The search had been neat,

quiet, methodical. But not perfect.

Kubiak made his own, going through Pamela's drawers and closets until he was certain the red, white, and blue striped blanket was not in the apartment.

He hadn't seen it near Pamela's body so the police hadn't taken it as they had the phone. Except for the person who was responsible for her death, Maurice had been the last to see the blanket, and he wasn't talking.

Kubiak scanned Pamela's bookshelves, found something trashy enough to keep him turning pages, turned off the lights, and settled into a chair in the bedroom. Maurice chose the bed.

"You know what to do if I run into trouble."

Maurice yawned.

Kubiak switched on his penlight and opened the book.

The sound of the front door latch woke him. He caught the book as it was falling from his lap, placed it gently on the floor over the softly glowing penlight, stood slowly. To his left he heard Maurice stir. He laid his palm on the dog's side to quiet him.

A bright flashlight beam was playing in the front room. Kubiak crept to the bedroom doorway, watched the young bearded man in jeans and workboots kneel beside the console, set the flashlight down. By the time he

had pried off the speaker cover and found the space behind it empty, Kubiak had quietly moved to the front door. He hit the switch for the overhead lights. "Don't run, Jimmy," he said as the young man leaped to his feet and shaded his eyes with his hand. "We have a lot to talk about."

Jimmy Cogan wasn't listening. He rushed the door, coming at Kubiak bent low, his right elbow out. Kubiak ducked the elbow, brought his knee up to meet Jimmy's face. Jimmy went down but dragged Kubiak with him.

"Maurice. Come quick."

Kubiak had landed on top. It took him a full minute to turn Jimmy onto his stomach and bend one arm sharply between his shoulder blades.

"You're not moving, Jimmy," he said, straddling Cogan's lower back. "Now, how about giving me your other hand?"

Jimmy did. It landed in that tender spot between Kubiak's right eye and the bridge of his nose.

“You look like a raccoon,” Denise said. “You want to see?”

“No, thanks. At least I don't have to worry about him chasing me up a chimney.”

Maurice scrambled clumsily to his feet.

"Rin Tin Tin you're not. Pamela wasn't kidding. He doesn't answer to his name."

"Who says it's his name?"

"Is that the man who belongs to this dog?"

The second question came from Margaret. She was still in her robe and slippers. Kubiak hadn't expected her to go directly from Pamela's door to his own and be on his couch pumping questions at Denise and watching old movies when he showed up at two A.M. with Jimmy.

It was Jimmy Cogan she was pointing at now. He was in the chair Kubiak had used to sit at the window. His wrists were shackled to it, courtesy of the pudgier of the two uniformed officers who had responded to the 911 call. Waters and Nagle had arrived ten minutes later, not much time at all. With them was a girl they said they'd found waiting in her car downstairs. She was wearing Nagle's handcuffs, and if she had bothered putting up a fight, it was over. Kubiak recognized her from the photos in Pamela's front room. Considering her reputation, he thought Karen Galloway looked downright mousy.

"Come off it, Margaret," Kubiak said. He borrowed Denise's cigarette from between her fingers, took a drag, coughed out smoke.

"I think you look tough enough

with two black eyes, friend," the pudgy uniform said. "Why don't you put out the Virginia Slims?"

"Friend," Kubiak muttered. "Nice word, that word."

Waters took two steps forward, rested his hand on Kubiak's shoulder, squeezed.

"Looks like this makes three favors we owe you."

"We. That's another nice word."

Margaret suggested they call back the paramedics. Denise told her it was probably just the nicotine rushing to her husband's head.

"How did you know Jimmy would show at grandma's apartment tonight?" Waters asked.

"I figured he'd think it might be his last chance to pick up something that wasn't there any more."

"Which was?"

"The twenty thousand dollars he had Karen stash in the record console."

The hand on Kubiak's shoulder squeezed tighter.

"You mean, all this time . . ."

"It must have seemed a pretty safe spot when she put it there. If she and Jimmy were picked up, a key to a safe deposit box or a Greyhound locker would be checked out, but an old key to her grandmother's front door probably wouldn't. Isn't that right, Jimmy?"

Cogan muttered a string of

words that brought a blush to Margaret's cheeks.

"But you said it wasn't there any more," Denise said. "So why was he looking for it?"

"Because he didn't know it had already been taken."

"The girlfriend," Nagle offered, tugging at Karen's arm. "Jimmy Cogan, the teacher, scammed by his own pupil."

Jimmy called her a name. Karen, who had begun to cry softly, lifted her chin at him. "I didn't," she said. "I told you I couldn't go up there again."

"I don't think Karen's as quick a learner as you give her credit for," Kubiak said to Cogan. "The apartment was searched. She wouldn't have had to do that. She knew where the money was. And if she had it, she wouldn't have been waiting for you downstairs tonight."

If Jimmy was relieved, it didn't show in his face. "Then," he said, "which bastard stole my money?"

"Someone who did not know where it was hidden but had access to the apartment."

Denise's eyes drifted slowly toward Margaret. The detectives followed her gaze. Margaret's hand went to her throat. "Oh, Mr. Kubiak." She wasn't giggling.

"Relax, Margaret," Kubiak told her. "As much as I'd enjoy seeing the secretary/treasurer of

my association handcuffed to my dining room chair, I have every reason to hope you'll be flapping your slippers back to your own unit before sunrise."

"Seems to me," the thinner of the two uniforms said, "you're the one with access. You've been there all night."

"That's true. But I wasn't looking for the money."

"No, of course not."

"I was looking for a blanket."

"A blanket. You don't got your own blankets?"

"This was a particular blanket. Pamela Galloway kept it in her lap when she went to the beach, and this dog would lay his head on it. The blanket's gone, and so is the money. They were taken away together."

His muscles already growing stiff from his encounter with Jimmy, Kubiak had to push himself off the chair's arms to get to his feet. He faced Waters.

"When I saw Pamela's body this afternoon, I thought she was dressed to go to the beach. But she was dressed for coming back from the beach. Yesterday. You remember what you were doing all day yesterday? You were following me. When I left here just after eleven, Pamela was down at the beach, being watched by Albert and his cousin. I got back at five thirty and found the dog in the garage. He's a curious dog, and he was sniffing at something

he shouldn't have been and got himself run over because of it.

"Remember Jimmy's phone ringing when we were in his apartment? You should have answered it, Pat. It was your partner on the other end."

"Albert?" Waters laughed. "Sorry, Kubiak. That won't work. How could Albert have known we were at Jimmy's?"

"He didn't, but it wasn't him who dialed the number. It was Pamela, phoning her granddaughter to warn her about this cop and a girl she had thought came from the Christian Sisters who had just pulled twenty thousand dollars out of the record player.

"Maybe Albert's smarter than you are, and he figured the money might be there. Maybe Pamela let some hint slip to his cousin. But both of you knew you didn't have much time left to play on the beach once I started asking around about you. Albert decided to move while you were chasing me uptown. The girl left Pamela's door unlocked so he could search for the money while she was down at the beach, but he must not have found it or he wouldn't have still been there when she was brought back.

"Pamela's not very good at answering questions. It must have been a frustrating couple of hours they spent together, and when he caught her with the

phone and grabbed it out of her hand, he lost his temper. He used the blanket to wipe off the phone and stuffed the blanket and the money in his cousin's bag, and the two of them took the freight elevator to her car in the garage, where unfortunately they met the dog, who was interested in what they were doing with his friend's blanket.

"Think about it, Pat. It all happened on the only day you weren't there with them, and it happened while Pamela was still in her beach things. Albert didn't have to let you in on anything even after the fact because his only way out was to pin the killing on Cogan, and you were the one out to burn Jimmy anyway. And we all know that if you divide three into twenty, you have to deal with a fraction. If you still don't believe me, let's ask Albert if he'd mind taking his cousin's car in to have its wheel well checked for fur and blood?"

Waters chewed his gum, looked at Nagle. Whatever he saw in his partner's face must not have reassured him because he pushed past the two uniforms and knocked Albert to the floor with one blow to his face.

Karen jumped back and began to cry again. Jimmy Cogan let out a howl. Margaret covered her eyes. Kubiak addressed the pudgy cop, who had given up his

handcuffs: "Better take them both now, jerky. Before we're all raccoons."

The guests were gone. The dog had been walked. Denise was at the bathroom sink in her slip, stripping off her make-up. Kubiak, holding a can of Old Style, still fully clothed except for his shoes, was sitting on the toilet lid, there for the company.

"You've done it again, Kubiak. Margaret's hero."

"Not quite," he said. "There was that one question that never was answered. It's too late now."

"Maurice?"

"Pamela's blanket had three stripes, red, white, and blue. The flag of France. I looked through her bookshelves. Nothing on the country, nothing in the language. I don't even know if she ever went overseas, or if the dog was named after some boy she met while she was a girl in college. God, what year would that have been?"

"Maybe she just got it out of a movie."

"I wonder what years of her life were playing in her head while she sat there each day be-

tween eleven and one, staring out at the lake."

"You've been listening to the poets again, Kubiak. I've warned you about that."

He leaned forward and kissed the back of her knee, and she let him.

When he left the bathroom for another beer, Maurice was at the front door, whining. The dog had chewed through the bandages around his torso.

"So you're the one feeling full of himself tonight," Kubiak said, removing what was left of them. Still Maurice waited by the door.

In the corner was the doggie bed Denise had purchased for him. He had yet to lie in it.

"You don't want to do this now, do you, old friend? She and I are just starting to get along again."

While Denise was still in the bathroom, Kubiak followed the dog to the freight elevator. When the car didn't come, Kubiak called it. The door slid open. Maurice entered the elevator, sat facing forward, mouth open, tongue hanging.

Kubiak pressed the button to each floor, waited until the door slid shut, then padded, barefoot, back home.

FICTION

THE RUT

David Braly



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 4/98

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The way Jim Travers saw it, it wasn't that his life was too scheduled, but rather that his life had *become* a schedule.

Every weekday was the same. Monday through Friday he rose from bed at six thirty, showered and shaved, had breakfast with his wife and children, read the morning newspaper while half listening to the *Today* show, drove to Manhattan, where he processed insurance claims from nine to five with an hour off for lunch, drove home, read the evening newspaper, ate dinner with his wife and children, worked in his tool room for an hour, and watched television with the family until it was time for bed. Weekends varied from weekdays, but they were settled into an equally rigid pattern of their own.

Within the pattern were other patterns. The television that he watched so routinely consisted of the same programs, week after week. If he and his wife Jeanne agreed to watch a movie or something else outside the normal schedule, invariably it would be the identical sort of variation that they always followed. Even their sex life was programmed: Tuesdays and Fridays, with the same procedures, comments, and duration. For years Jim had failed to notice the pattern, but once he became

aware of it, it bothered him mightily. He called it "a rut."

After he did become aware of the pattern, he made several efforts to break it. The biggest obstacle was his job. No matter what else he might alter, the job was always the same. Also, the morning, afternoon, and evening routines of other members of the family remained the same, which ensnared him as a member of that family. Thus his routine for virtually the whole day was determined by other people.

His efforts to change his television viewing habits, which were also the viewing habits of other family members, created howls of protest. He considered buying a small television for himself alone, but the problems it would create with Jeanne and the kids—to say nothing of its expense and the complications associated with programming it—dissuaded him. And besides, he couldn't imagine missing his favorite shows for other shows that he cared nothing about.

An effort to alter his sexual habits resulted in Jeanne's annoyance, a fight, and, on the second try, a sprained wrist. Unless he changed his job or left his family or threw out his television set, Jim concluded that he couldn't change the pattern, couldn't rise out of the rut. As bitterly as he had come to hate the pattern, he was unwilling to leave his

good job, abandon his family, or dispose of the television set that, for all its faults, remained the principal diversion of his and his family's life.

He tried to force little changes.

He went for a walk one evening instead of working in his shop. A dog tried to bite him.

For breakfast he had pancakes with Log Cabin syrup instead of waffles with Brer Rabbit molasses, scrambled eggs instead of poached eggs, plain Quaker Oats instead of Quaker Oats sprinkled with sugar and doused with milk. He found himself enjoying breakfast less.

Instead of listening to his favorite radio station on his way to and from work, he tuned to stations he didn't like and tried to develop an enthusiasm for them. That effort only caused him to arrive at work and at home in a heightened state of crankiness.

For a while he suspected he was licked. No changes seemed possible without a sacrifice of preference, job, or family. The rut was insurmountable. He was doomed to languish within it for the remainder of his life, like a prisoner on a train forever journeying around a circular track. Nothing could free him. Nothing could ease the tyranny of the rut. No Russian serf had been as tightly regulated by imperial ukase as Jim was by his routine. And he was doomed, it seemed,

to remain tightly regulated.

Under the circumstances, he decided that the most intelligent thing he could do would be to look for positive features about the pattern. Good things. There had to be some. He had settled into the pattern for a reason, even if the settling had been done unconsciously over a period of many years. Along the route of his life he had made choices that had led to the development of the pattern. Obviously he had made those choices because at the time they had appeared to be the most advantageous or pleasant. Indeed, had he made other choices, all that might have happened was that he would be stuck in a different pattern, one possibly even more objectionable.

He dissected the ingredients of the pattern. He found them advantageous. He didn't like his job, but the pay was good. He had a good marriage, with an intelligent and reasonably pretty wife who had produced three children who had not yet become juvenile delinquents. He hated the daily commute to Manhattan, a definite negative, yet TV shows, woodworking, and various other habitual activities were pleasant, certainly not things he would dream of dispensing with. He worked in a safe environment and lived in a good neighborhood in the great-

est country on earth. Yes indeed, if the components of the pattern were removed from the whole and examined piece by piece, it turned out to be, in general, a good pattern.

However, it was still a pattern.

A rut.

He wanted something different. Diversity. Perhaps not much, but at least some. He needed it, and soon.

He thought for a long time about how to achieve diversity.

For a long, long time, nothing came to him.

Thinking about how to break the pattern almost became part of the pattern.

Finally, at work, an idea suddenly came to him.

He'd been processing a claim for a warehouse wrecked by flooding in Missouri, one of many such claims created by the recent heavy rainfalls there. While reviewing figures on the estimated damage to the warehouse's contents, he'd nodded off. Although his eyes were closed for only a minute, it was long enough to dream. For a moment he was back on the street fighting the early morning traffic, and then he was abruptly awake again, looking at the figures. At first he ignored the dream. It hadn't been significant. But then it struck him: dreams!

Jim usually forgot dreams after waking. The few that he re-

membered at all, he remembered only briefly before they vanished like vapor in a breeze. However, he realized, this evanescence didn't have to happen.

Years before as a college student he'd heard or read that anyone could remember dreams by programming the mind before going to sleep. One only had to tell the mind to remember the dreams, and it would. Jim had been skeptical but had decided to try it. And it had worked.

For several days he'd remembered the dreams of the previous night. And what dreams they were! Some were the standard student anxiety dreams about failing tests, missing classes, and discovering at exam time that he had enrolled months ago in a class he'd forgotten about and never attended. Some were dreams that cast him back into junior high school, the worst period of his life, which, he suspected, explained why some mornings he awoke depressed and anxious. He'd had an especially frightening one about wandering through his parents' house in the night; a very erotic dream about a girl he sat near in calculus class; and, to his perpetual puzzlement, a couple of dreams about climbing a mountain—something he'd never done, never planned to do, never wanted to do, never heard a suggestion

that he do, and indeed never gave a single thought to.

Unfortunately, within a few days something unanticipated happened. Although he'd normally fallen quickly into deep sleep, he soon found himself lying awake nights, unable to induce sleep. One night he became so desperate that he tried counting sheep in an imaginary flock. He'd heard that people could induce sleep by counting sheep. He couldn't. Even when he did drift into sleep, he couldn't stay asleep long. He found himself sleeping for only five or fifteen minutes at a time before waking, then lying awake a few minutes before falling into another five, ten, or fifteen minutes of sleep.

Finally he realized that the insomnia had started soon after he programmed his mind to remember dreams. He suspected the programming was responsible. By telling his mind to do something while he slept, he was essentially telling it to remain awake. The restlessness of his mind, in turn, was also causing his body to remain awake.

When he stopped telling his mind to remember the dreams, the insomnia ended. It took a few days before he returned to his old pattern of deep sleep, but he did return. Again he awoke without remembering his dreams.

A few years later he had again tried the mind-programming

technique. Again the quantity and variety of his dreams surprised him. Again he was forced to stop, after a few days, because of insomnia. He had resolved not to do it again.

Now he decided to break the resolution. If he couldn't experience any diversity in his waking hours, at least he could experience some by remembering the adventures he dreamed about. In sleep he would again find variety, including ultimately harmless danger. It wouldn't be very satisfying—barely more so than daydreams—but it would be something different. And unlike his daydreams, it would be unpredictable. He had never suspected the strength of his attraction to the girl in the calculus class before he dreamed about her, let alone given thought to climbing mountains. Who knew what he might now discover? If he found himself beset by fresh bouts of insomnia, he could stop.

He tried it that very night. After he got into bed and Jeanne had switched off the table lamp, Jim closed his eyes and thought hard: I want to remember my dreams; I want to remember my dreams; I want to remember my dreams. Soon afterward he drifted into sleep.

At six thirty the alarm went off, and he rose from bed. Not until he was shaving did he re-

member the effort to program his mind to retain dreams. For a moment he stood there staring, unseeing, at the mirror, trying to recall any dream he'd had last night. None came to mind. The effort had failed.

He wondered why. He continued to wonder about it through breakfast. It distracted him from the morning paper and from the *Today* show. The reason he thought about it so much was that he had become afraid. It seemed an illogical fear. Yet he couldn't help having it. What he feared was that he'd lost the ability to dream.

Nonsense, of course. His mind simply hadn't gotten the message. Or hadn't acted on it yet. Tonight would be different.

Driving into Manhattan he began to wonder if he really wanted to find out. If it did develop that he actually couldn't dream, it would shake him worse than anything else that had happened since he became aware of the pattern.

He continued to worry about it all morning. Until just before lunch at least. He was going down an endless column of figures on a claim, looking for errors, when—

The alarm went off.

Jim awoke—in bed! He looked at the clock and saw that it was six thirty.

Everything that had happened

that morning—including the worrying—had been parts of a dream. He remembered the dream in detail. It annoyed him tremendously that he had wasted a night's rest dreaming about traffic and work. But at least he could dream. That was a relief. And he could remember dreams.

For a while he felt pleased.

The next night, however, he again dreamed about work.

After it happened a third night, he realized that the pattern of his days had also become the pattern of his nights. What he did every day was what he dreamed about doing every night. There was no variation, no deviation, no escape from the rut. He did the same things over and over and over, day and night, week after week, month after month. The pattern was so deeply branded on his mind and soul that he had lost the ability to even dream free from it.

That was a shock. The passing of the minutes and the hours during which he thought about it didn't lessen the shock. Indeed, the more he thought about it, the greater the shock became. It came and went in waves. For a while he would agonize about it; then something like traffic or work would take his mind off it, but later his thoughts would return to it. Each wave of despair was stronger than the one before; each time he resumed thinking

about it the realization of what his life had become was more sickening and frightening than the time before.

When, that night in bed, he told Jeanne about it, she laughed.

And kept on laughing.

The whole idea that he'd wanted to escape the rut so fiercely that he tried to do it through dreams, only to discover that he was trapped in the same rut in his dreams as when he was awake, struck her as hilarious.

He resented her laughter and made it clear to her that he resented it, and still she laughed. She must have laughed, off and on, for more than fifteen minutes. Jim turned on his side to go to sleep. That night he didn't program his mind to remember dreams.

The next morning he awoke at six thirty and began going through his normal morning routine. He didn't mention his problem again to Jeanne, since obviously she didn't see it as a problem. Once, though, over the range, she released one short little burst of laughter. Their older son Kyle asked her why she had laughed.

"It's nothing," she said. "Just a thought." Jim didn't have to ask what it was about.

Driving to work he wondered whether he should have told her in the first place. But why shouldn't he have expected her

help, or at least her sympathy? After thirty-five years of marriage, if he couldn't confide in her, whom could he confide in? And how could he escape the pattern without her help? How could—

Thirty-five years?

That wasn't right. They hadn't been married that long. Not nearly that long. Why would he think thirty-five years? Why would he even for a moment uncritically accept such a figure that was so obviously wrong when he did think of it? There could be only one explanation.

With all the mental force he could muster, Jim willed himself to wake up.

He opened his eyes and found himself lying on his back next to Jeanne in the dark bedroom. Despite not willing himself to remember his dreams that night, he remembered the one he'd just had.

He broke into a cold sweat. The pattern again. The rut. He couldn't control . . . couldn't influence . . . He struggled silently to avoid panic.

Quietly he rose from the bed, went into the living room, switched on the overhead light, and began to pace the floor. Gradually the fear subsided. Although being in a rut day and night was aggravating, there was no reason to panic. No reason to have any fear. Although

he was trapped, he was not being physically harmed. He was safe. He went back to bed.

When he woke the next morning, he actually did wonder for a minute if he was awake or merely dreaming again. Satisfied at last that he was really awake, he rose and began the usual routine. It was while he was stuck in traffic during the morning commute that a fresh idea for breaking the pattern came to him.

Until now he'd been looking at big changes. First, he had wanted to completely alter his life. When he realized how impossible that would be, he had sought to alter a regular feature of his life. That, too, had proved too great a task. Next had come the dream fiasco.

Now he wondered about altering a small, irregular feature of his routine. Something he did occasionally rather than daily. True, it would be a small change. Tiny, really. At this point, however, he sought any change that didn't involve a prison sentence or a tax audit.

He went through the day as usual, but his mind remained focused on how best to do one small thing differently. It had to be something small enough to accomplish but big enough to matter. Something, too, that would raise no objections from either employer or family.

On his way home it came to him. The answer to his problem would arrive in a month: his regular two-week vacation. For the last seven years they had gone to the same motel on the Jersey shore, where they ate at the same fast food joints and rented videos at the same store. The annual summer vacation had been another part of the routine, the pattern, the rut.

Not this year.

The words entered his mind with the force of a physical blow. They were . . . liberating. *Not this year!* Yes, he liked the sound of that.

This year they would go somewhere else. Somewhere entirely different. Jeanne wouldn't object too much. The kids might, at first, but they could adapt. The company, of course, had no say in where he vacationed. It was the ideal solution to the pattern's tyranny.

Europe, Hawaii, or the South Pacific would be perfect but of course were out of the question because of limited money and time. Even California, Texas, or Florida would be budget-busters. Maybe a car trip to Tennessee or Kentucky or Illinois? No. Again, too expensive. Canada? Same problem. He'd always wanted to see Maine, but in the autumn when the leaves had turned bright polychromatic colors, not in summer. Perhaps a history

tour taking in Philadelphia, Boston, and Washington? But there wasn't enough time.

Two weeks and a limited budget.

Where to?

Connecticut perhaps?

Perhaps.

But not New Jersey.

Absolutely not New Jersey.

"Honey, it's time you were up."

He opened his eyes. He didn't recognize the strange ceiling above him. He looked to one side. Jeanne was arranging her hair before the mirror of a strange dresser made of imitation wood. He rose on his elbow and looked around the room. Clearly a motel room.

"Where are we?" he asked.

"Jim, don't you dare start that rut nonsense again."

"Where are we?"

"Exactly where we're supposed to be on our vacation."

"New Jersey?"

"Of course."

He shook his head. "No," he said. He began to beat his forehead with his fist. "No, no, no!"

"Jim! Stop that! You'll hurt yourself!" It did hurt. It woke him up.

He looked ahead at the long line of stalled cars, vans, and trucks. He had fallen asleep on the way into Manhattan, his head dropping onto the steering wheel. He was stalled on the bridge. Again. Oh well, at least

he wasn't in New Jersey. But he realized, beyond any doubt, that he would be in New Jersey in another month. It was inevitable.

He turned off the ignition, unhooked his seatbelt, and opened the door. He slid out of the car. The man in the car behind him honked, but he ignored it. He walked to the railing, looked across the water at the skyscrapers, looked at the boats and barges in the water, looked down at the water itself.

He could no longer stand it. He *had* to scream.

"Hold it."

He turned and found himself facing a frowning, wide-faced cop in a dark blue uniform.

"It's okay, officer, I wasn't going to jump. I was . . . I was just getting some air."

"No, you were going to start screaming just like you always do. I'm getting tired of this 'rut' nonsense, Travers."

Jim's surprise was so great that he woke up. He had only been dreaming. Dreams inside dreams inside dreams. Now he was awake. Or was he?

He looked around. Jeanne was seated at a strange dresser made of imitation wood. She was looking in the mirror and arranging her hair. He looked around the room. Clearly it was a motel room. He tossed off the

sheet and sat up. "Am I awake?" he asked.

"Don't start that again."

He looked down at his bare feet. He lifted his right foot and brought its heel down hard on his left big toe. It hurt enough that he gasped. He was awake.

"I've been having dreams inside dreams," he said.

"What else is new? You and your rut. Frankly, it's getting awfully boring."

He walked over to the curtained window. He drew back the curtain, looked outside, saw the waves lapping the sandy shore. It was all very, very familiar.

I had hoped that at least we wouldn't be in Jersey," he said weakly.

"Jersey? You know better than that."

He released the curtain and turned around to look at her. "Aren't we in New Jersey?"

"Of course not."

"We're not?"

Could it be? Dared he hope it? Had the routine really been broken?

"Where exactly are we?"

"The North Carolina coast. As though I would agree to your silly idea to vacation in New Jersey to break out of your rut!"

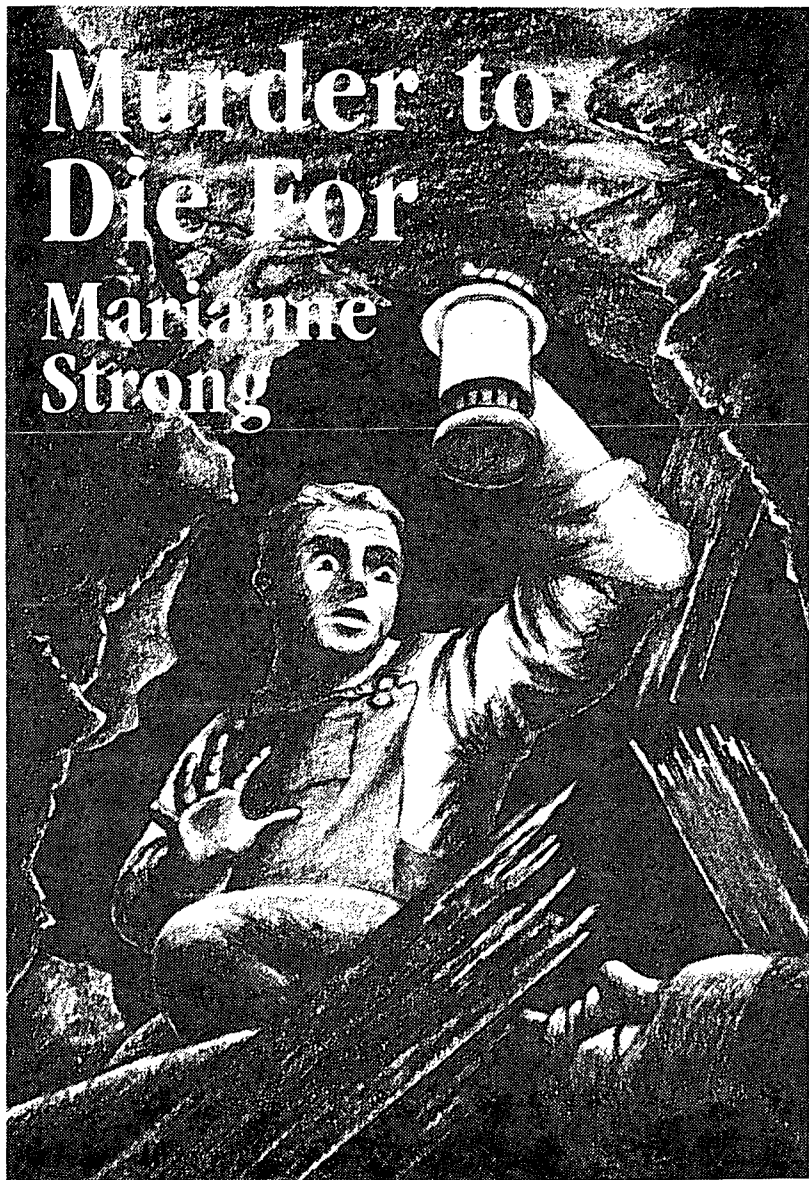
"My silly . . ." Jim swallowed hard. "It's here that we always come for our vacations, isn't it? Not New Jersey. Here to the North Carolina coast?"

"Of course we do." She finished fixing her hair and stood. "Don't just stand there, Jim, or we'll be too late to order the breakfast special. You know how they are. Jim? Jim? Jim!"

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Murder to Die For Marianne Strong



The voice on the phone had sounded like a woman's. Low, soft, almost a whisper. Sheriff Stan Odyssek replaced the receiver and stared at the boxy black telephone on his desk. He seldom received crank calls at the office. Bloomsville's aging population harbored few nuts and even fewer murderers. You had to go fifteen miles along the Susquehanna River up Route 11 to Wilkes-Barre to find any real crime. And even up there murders were rare.

"Problem?" Deputy Jim Bell asked his boss.

"We get any other kind of phone call here?"

Jim shrugged. "Call for a pizza now and then. If somebody hits a six instead of an eight."

"This lady didn't want a pizza. She wanted me to know that she thinks somebody's been murdered."

Jim's eyes widened. "She say who?"

Stan pressed his thumb and forefinger into his eyeballs to massage his aching eyes, a habit he'd fallen into watching for incoming aircraft on a naval carrier for ten years in war and peace. "Yeah, she did. Mrs. Washick. Her wake is tonight. My mother's going."

Jim's eyes bugged out.

"The caller said your mother had something to do with the murder?"

"Jesus, Jim," Stan said, massaging his eyeballs again. "You want to make homicide detective in Wilkes-Barre, you got a way to go. No, dammit, my mother has not been fingered. The caller didn't name the killer. She said, 'Sheriff, Hedwig Washick died because she found out too much. She tried to help me, so they killed her.' Stan shook his head. "Then she said something else. Sounded like 'poison, all poison.'"

"That's it?"

"No." Stan stared into space for a few seconds. "She said goodbye."

"You know," Jim said, "I used to see Mrs. Washick at church when I was a kid. She went to nine o'clock Mass, her and her husband. She wore the same purple coat for years. Black hat with some kind of droopy purple flower."

"Yeah," Stan said, remembering. He'd seen a woman with a hat like that once or twice when he'd driven his mother to a church meeting. Maybe his mother could tell him something about her.

"Why would anybody want to poison her?" Jim asked.

"Nobody did."

"But . . ."

"Hedwig Washick died two days ago. I read Dr. Featherby's report. She died of a heart attack. Her second one. Doc had treated her for years."

“Okay,” Jim said, “then we just got a crank call.”

“Maybe. Mrs. Washick died at the edge of the Susquehanna on her own property. She’d fallen and hit her head on some rocks. But what killed her was the heart.”

“Maybe Doc missed the poison? Wasn’t looking for it.”

“Maybe,” Stan said. “But I doubt it. He doesn’t miss much.”

Growing up in Bloomsville, Stan had known a lot of women just like Mrs. Washick. Married to miners. Not dirt poor, but not well-off enough to get a new hat when the flower on the old one drooped. Hardworking, usually as cleaning women. Religious. Quiet. Tough. They usually lived until about eighty-five, then died surrounded by their kids, who’d become teachers or dentists or lawyers and moved away from Bloomsville. They usually didn’t know anything that would get them killed. Mrs. Washick had been sixty-five.

“So what are you thinking?” Jim asked.

“I’m thinking I’ll go to that wake tonight. And talk to my mother.” His mother was no Mrs. Washick. His mother usually knew a lot, but nobody would dare kill her. “And I think I’ll talk to John Featherby.”

The rosary women from St. Casimir’s were murmuring the

fifth set of Hail Marys when he entered Bob Bobrowski’s Funeral Home. He took a seat in the last row of blue velveteen chairs lined up facing the coffin and nodded to the man next to him, Ben Rosenburg, the owner of a truck dealership. Ben knew everybody and liked everybody, so he attended a lot of wakes. But his familiarity with the ritual didn’t stop him from feeling uncomfortable. He pulled at his collar and straightened his tie about every three minutes. As uncomfortable as Ben and the other men, Stan took a few minutes to shuffle his feet around, cough occasionally, and shift positions twice.

Then he looked at the figure propped up on the white satin pillow in the coffin. No purple hat with a droopy flower. Powder, pink lipstick, black and grey hair arranged in smooth round puffs around the face. Mrs. Washick hadn’t looked like that in life. Her skin had been greyer, her hair flatter.

In the navy Stan had seen funerals in Turkey—old women in black, their friends rocking back and forth, grieving, he’d felt, for their own fate as well as their friend’s. Again he was grateful to his father for leaving a tidy sum to his mother. She was in the front row of the rosary women wearing a new brown hat with an upturned brim and

a nifty gold anchor pin on one side, a gift from Stan.

He looked at the family seated at one side of the coffin. A thin man with a large forehead and pronounced cheekbones was nearest the coffin. His hands hung between his knees, and he alternated between covering his eyes with a hand and glancing out at the dark street through the door in the back.

Next to him a woman maybe ten years younger than Mrs. Washick, pale and thin with stiff black hair, dabbed at red eyes, then stared at the coffin. Next to her sat another man, with a round face and thinning blond hair. He was staring at his fingernails as if surprised he had them. Stan resolved again to find a good woman and marry. Only women knew how to grieve properly for you. Men only felt uncomfortable that you'd gone ahead and died.

The women were blessing themselves, signaling the end of the rosary. People began to file up to the coffin, stopping to give condolences to the three people at the side.

Stan got in line, trying to remember what his mother usually said to people at wakes. He shuffled up behind Ben Rosenberg, listening intently. But Ben mumbled whatever it was he said. Stan had to improvise.

He shook hands with the

round-faced man and moved on to the woman.

"Sorry," he said. "My mother knew your, uh, knew Mrs. Washick."

"My sister," the woman said. "She's my sister." The voice was wispy and soft.

Stan wanted to hear the voice again. Feeling a little ghoulish, he thought as fast as he could. "My deputy said to tell you he's sorry, too. He used to see Mrs., uh, your sister at Mass. She went to St. Casimir's, I think?"

"Yes, she did." The woman looked over at the coffin. "She was a very good person." She looked back at Stan. "Too good."

Yes, Stan thought. She could have made the call. Was she trying to tell him something now? The woman next in line cleared her throat and nudged his arm. He reluctantly moved on to the thin man with the high cheekbones. "Mr. Washick," he said.

The man blinked rapidly and nodded.

"Sorry about your wife."

The man nodded. He looked blank, as if he'd tuned out.

"I hadn't realized she was ill," Stan said.

"Yeah, she was."

The voice was gravelly, as if the man had smoked for thirty years or breathed in too much coal dust. He hadn't made the call.

Stan felt the nudge at his el-

bow again. The woman gave him a steely look, reminding him of Sister Mary David, his fourth grade teacher. He moved on.

At the coffin he linked his fingers as if in prayer. If somebody killed you, Mrs. Washick, he told the dead woman silently, I'll find the bastard for you. Or the bitch.

He turned to look for Dr. Featherby and caught his mother's eye. She was watching him intently. He'd have to explain his presence the next time he went to her house.

He headed for the back seats again where Dr. Featherby was talking to two men. There he exchanged greetings, expressed his opinion about the new convention hall going up in Wilkes-Barre ten miles up the highway, caught John Featherby's eye, and flicked his own eyes toward the door.

Featherby followed him out. They moved to an unoccupied part of the sidewalk.

"Have a few questions about Mrs. Washick," Stan said.

Featherby's facial muscles tightened.

"Heart attack, you said in the report," Stan said. "John, I know you wouldn't have written that if it weren't the case, but anything unusual strike you? Anything at all?"

"Why?"

"First answer my question."

"This official?"

"No. Not yet, anyway."

Featherby adjusted his glasses on his narrow, straight nose. He looked more like an aging leading man than a small town doctor. But then Stan remembered once seeing a picture of the Russian writer Anton Chekhov. Goodlooking man. Featherby resembled him. Chekhov had been a doctor, too.

"Okay," Featherby said. "I knew when you walked in that I'd end up telling you this. I don't like to, though." He sighed. "Mrs. Washick died by the river on the Washick property. But she had no water in her lungs, so she didn't drown. She had a gash on the right side of her head. I believe she fell and hit a rock. She was still alive then but died a short while later. Massive heart failure. She had considerable heart damage from a previous attack."

"You're not telling me anything new."

"No. And I shouldn't say anything more. But I know you must have good reason for asking." Featherby took a deep breath. "Trouble is, two, maybe three years ago, just before you got back from the navy, I did the death certificate for Frank Washick's partner. He died in a mine cave-in. Gash on his head. There was talk of foul play, but I found no evidence of it. Neither did Sheriff Zavada. That's all

and it isn't much, unless it adds to whatever made you ask."

"No, it isn't much."

Featherby nodded, stood expectantly a moment, then turned to reenter the funeral parlor.

Stan followed, but at the door he stopped. "Wait a minute. Two or three years ago, you say?"

"Yes. More like three. Some-time in the spring."

Stan did not follow Featherby inside. He'd have a busy day tomorrow.

The Osterhaut Library in Wilkes-Barre looked exactly the way it had in '65 when Stan had researched a paper on legalizing marijuana for a high school English class. He'd been for it then. The paper got a B. He had not presented the "con" side very well. He thought he could do a better job now, and not just because he'd learned how to write in college. He'd learned a few other things there, too.

He reached for the big-knobbed bronze handle on the oak door of the library. Even in high school he'd spent more time here than he really needed to. In the entrance hallway, splashes of blue, red, yellow, and green colored the brick flooring. Stan let the warm, nostalgic pleasure run through his veins. He loved this library. It had been a church in the late nineteenth century. Wilkes-Barre had done some-

thing right. They hadn't torn the church down when the congregation, grown too small, gave up the hard-to-heat gothic structure. They had turned it into the town library. It wasn't the only beautiful building in town, but it was the one Stan had had access to as the son of a miner turned mechanic when his lungs started to go.

He headed for the back room. There he knew he'd find the archives he wanted: back issues of the Wilkes-Barre *Times Leader* and the Bloomsville *Sentinel* along with Mrs. Toth, who was a more accurate and complete archive than any newspaper for Wilkes-Barre and Bloomsville over the last thirty years.

Efficient as always, Mrs. Toth lost no time in setting him up at one of the big oak tables, so intimidatingly shiny with layers of varnish that no high school boy had dared carve his initials into the wood.

"Read carefully first," Mrs. Toth told him. "Then we'll talk. Write down any questions you have. Take notes. Even F. Scott Fitzgerald used notes to keep plot and characters straight."

Stan felt intimidated all over again. Mrs. Toth had once been an English teacher, the old fashioned kind whose enthusiasm made you want to visit Wordsworth's Lake District and Homer's Troy and whose standards

demanded that you take notes, read for detail, and use a dictionary so that you didn't use *affect* when you meant *effect*.

Stan dug into the front pages of the *Times Leader* and soon found the details. Frank Washick and his partner Simon Soltis had been earning their living the way many men had after the main coalfields had closed, flooded by the Susquehanna River years ago. They'd been mining pits and shafts long since abandoned by the big coal companies, a dangerous business. A shaft had collapsed on them, trapping them in a chamber six feet high and ten feet wide.

Workers with drills had taken two weeks to reach them. They'd drilled a small shaft first to drop down food and water, buying time to slowly drill a larger one, holding their breath all the while lest it cave in. Frank Washick had come out alive. Simon Soltis had died two days before the drill reached the chamber.

He read the accounts again. Soltis had died of heart failure, the doctors believed. It was hard to say. He might have died of the injury to the head and chest. According to Washick, a piece of wooden shoring had fallen and killed him. Nobody had proved otherwise.

What happened to a man's mind, Stan wondered, after sitting in a black pit for days wait-

ing for rescue, then sitting some more with a dead man next to you?

He asked Mrs. Toth.

"It silenced Frank Washick. I don't think he talked much to anybody after that except his wife. He stopped going to Mass except on Christmas. I always thought he went then only to please her."

"Maybe," Stan said. "They get along?"

"They seemed to for twenty years. Then they had some trouble. But I don't know that any couple really gets along. I'd say the Washicks probably needed each other. Or at least he needed her. I believe she was probably his last tie to sanity. Like Silas Marner and little Eppie. Do you remember?"

Stan did. In high school he'd never admitted that he'd liked the hoary old nineteenth century story of the abandoned child and the miser who grew to love her fiercely. Eppie had never left old Silas, and the story ended happily. Stan wondered what Silas would've done if she had.

"Yeah, I remember," he said.

"Do you remember why Silas became a recluse in the first place?"

He was about to say he hadn't been warned there'd be a quiz, but he knew Mrs. Toth would have a point. "He, uh . . ." Stan thought. "He was falsely ac-

cused of something. I can't remember what."

"He was falsely accused of theft." Mrs. Toth looked down at the newspapers. "It must twist one's soul to be falsely accused and be unable to prove one's innocence."

"Anyone accuse Washick of murder?"

"The newspapers speculated. So did radio announcers. It was most unfair. But the story was sensational, and it sold newspapers. And of course there was talk, a good deal of it, and he must have heard."

"What talk?"

Mrs. Toth straightened her shoulders. "I won't say unless you can assure me this is official. I prefer facts over gossip."

"It's official."

"I thought so. I know you don't care for idle gossip either. Some people thought Frank might have killed Simon Soltis. They owned property together up where Frank lives now, near the river. Frank and Simon had a falling out over it. Frank wanted to buy Simon's share of the property. Simon refused to sell."

"Not much of a motive for murder."

"But we don't know all the facts, do we? About the property. And we can't see the whole picture until we complete our research."

"Right." Stan sighed. He'd al-

ways figured the best training for police would be five courses writing research papers.

He thanked Mrs. Toth for her help as he had twenty years ago and headed for his mother's place back in Bloomsville.

Stan admonished his mother for not telling him earlier about her pending bus trip to Atlantic City the next day.

"Since when do I have to report to my children where I'm going?" she asked.

"Look, Mom, just let Christine or me know. If one of us called and you weren't home, we'd worry."

"Didn't you enjoy traveling when you were in the navy?"

"I'm not saying you shouldn't travel. Just let us know."

"All right, I promise." She settled more comfortably into her tufted leather chair. "Now, what do you need to know about Mrs. Washick?"

"For starters, did she get along with her husband?"

"Well, they're an older generation. They don't tell everyone their troubles. Share your troubles, I guess it's called today. So I don't *really* know. But they had no children. I think Frank will be lost without her. The house will be very empty, and he will be very lonely down there by the river. It's a nice clapboard house with a porch ten feet wide. You

can see the river from the porch. But I never understood how Hedwig could live there. In the winter, ice must freeze an inch thick on the road leading into their place."

"But Jim said she was always at Mass. He says he used to see her and Frank every Sunday."

"Well, Jim hasn't been to Mass recently, now has he?"

Stan shifted. His mother didn't nag, but she let her children know when she disapproved. Stan hadn't been to Mass for some time.

"How do you figure that?"

"If he had been, he'd know that Hedwig hadn't been at Mass for the last several weeks."

Stan thought of Silas Marner. "Why not? She leave Frank?"

"She did, about two years ago. Then she went back. She became ill. Her heart. But it wasn't *her* illness that kept her away from Mass lately. It was her sister's."

"I talked to her at the wake. She looked pale, especially with that stiff dark hair."

"It's a wig, I suspect. She's had chemotherapy."

"Oh Christ. Poor woman."

Mrs. Odyssek raised an eyebrow. But she'd learned to accept her son's violation of the second commandment as business between him and God. "She'll be all right, I hear. She's been at Johns Hopkins University Hospital. In

Baltimore. Hedwig went with her."

"Therefore, she didn't attend Mass."

Mrs. Odyssek shook her head. "That explains some of the time she was missing. But she'd stopped coming about two weeks before her sister left for Baltimore."

"Maybe she was caring for her sister."

"I don't think so. Her sister was at Mass."

Stan made a mental note to call Featherby. "So she wasn't that sick yet. Why Johns Hopkins?"

"Some of the rosary women said that that hospital has a special treatment for lymphoma if it's caught early. I think that's why she went."

Stan nodded. "I see." He'd have to ask Featherby if insurance covered the trip and the treatment. "Thanks, Mom."

"You're welcome. So what do you think happened to Mrs. Washick?"

"Did I say anything happened?"

Mrs. Odyssek folded her hands and waited.

"Okay, okay," Stan said. He told his mother about the phone call. She wouldn't tell anybody. He knew that.

"Do you think Frank killed Hedwig?"

"I thought so, maybe, yeah. I

thought maybe Frank did in his wife because she left him."

"Of course not. She went back to him. And he'd hardly kill her for going to help her sister for a little while. Do you have another motive in mind?" Mrs. Odyssek raised her eyebrows.

"I don't know. Maybe. I've got to wonder about money as a motive."

Mrs. Odyssek raised her eyebrows. "Are you saying Frank killed Hedwig for money? Stan, just how do you think Hedwig would have come into enough money to be killed for? You aren't making sense. Any why would Frank have to kill her to get this supposed money?"

"Maybe he'd kill her if she took his money."

Mrs. Odyssek stared as if her son had gone mad.

"Just what money do you think Frank had?"

Stan shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe he found a gold vein on his property." He thought of Silas Marner again. "Maybe if the person you loved stole your gold . . ." He shrugged again. "How about giving me something for supper?"

Mrs. Odyssek smiled. She knew when her son wouldn't answer any more questions. Besides, she still enjoyed cooking, and she still enjoyed someone who appreciated it. She went to the kitchen, humming.

Back at the office Stan got Featherby on the phone and asked about insurance for Hedwig's sister. "She had insurance," Featherby replied. "But not nearly enough for Johns Hopkins."

"How did she pay for her treatments?"

"I wondered that myself. I referred her to Johns Hopkins even though I knew she couldn't afford it. I don't know where the money came from."

Stan hung up, called the bus station, asked for Mr. Adamczyk. Adamczyk regarded every passenger as his personal responsibility. He remembered where they went and when they went. It kept his brain sharp and clear at seventy-two. Hedwig Washick had taken a bus to Baltimore about five weeks before she'd died.

Stan stared at the phone for five minutes. Where had she gotten the money for the hospital bills? If she had. He'd have to check with the bank before he went to see Frank Washick. Frank had no doubt learned to keep quiet from his mining accident. He wouldn't talk unless Stan had some concrete details about his wife's trip. Even then he would be hard to break down. Miners knew how to endure.

With some regret he left Jim to handle a complaint about kids putting detergent in the foun-

tain on the town square. He'd like to see the results. It was the kind of prank he himself would have pulled in high school.

Stan parked the patrol car in front of the Mellon Bank. He still thought of it as the Miners National Bank, but it had changed hands and name five years ago. At least Mellon hadn't torn down the neoclassical building with its four fluted columns, to replace it with a steel box.

Inside, he looked up, as he always did, at the coffered ceiling. When he was a kid, he would go into the bank to stare up. The ceiling was about the grandest thing in Bloomsville then. And now. In the navy he had spent shore leaves looking at fluted columns and coffered ceilings in Greek ruins.

For the tenth time he promised himself he'd sign up for an archaeology course at Wilkes University in Wilkes-Barre.

He went directly to the manager's office. Cheryl Thomas always gave him a hard time about revealing records, but he could give her a good reason. Besides, Cheryl had a heart. She was a different generation from Mrs. Washick, but she had an eighty-year-old mother. She'd be sympathetic.

Cheryl listened to Stan's explanation with her poker expression, then agreed to check the records. Stan tried not to look at

her figure in its trim gold suit, but he didn't think a glance would hurt. He figured Cheryl was in her early thirties, maybe fourteen or fifteen years younger than he was. Maybe he could risk asking her out. He just wished her name was Dorothy or Alice. Cheryl's were always a lot younger than he was.

She came back. "I knew Hedwig Washick had deposited a good deal of money some weeks ago. I just wanted to check the figure."

"And?"

"One hundred and fifty thousand."

Stan took a minute to recover. If Hedwig Washick had taken her husband's money, undoubtedly stashed under some floorboard, where the hell had Frank Washick gotten a hundred and fifty thousand? What on the property was worth that much, that maybe both Simon Soltis and Hedwig Washick had died for?

"She didn't bring the deposit in herself," Cheryl said. "It was sent from a New Jersey bank five weeks ago. She withdrew the money four weeks ago."

"From a bank in New Jersey? You sure?"

Cheryl nodded. "Quite sure."

"Of course," Stan said hurriedly. "Thanks." He rose, hoping he hadn't blown it. "Uh, maybe when I'm finished with

this, you'd like to hear about it. Over coffee, or dinner?"

Cheryl smiled. "Yes, I would."

Stan returned her smile. "I'll get in touch." He left, swinging through the big bronze double doors. He allowed himself thirty seconds of joyful anticipation before he turned his thoughts back to Frank Washick.

What would Frank's money be doing in a bank in New Jersey? If it *was* Frank's money.

He drove past the town square and stopped to watch two businessmen talking to Jim Bell. They gestured at the fountain. Mounds of creamy white foam poured over the edge and billowed around the statue of the Greek muse in the middle.

Looked nice, Stan thought. Real nice.

The dirt road from State Highway 60 curved around a stand of pines, then climbed gradually for half a mile to the Washick porch. Stan slowed as he approached the house. It stood in a clearing. Anyone on the property could see a car approaching.

Or hear it. The road was rutted. Cars would bounce and rattle as Stan's was doing.

He came to a stop in front of the wide porch with the two green rockers and climbed out. He knocked on the front door and waited. When no one came, he peered through the stained

glass, but the red and blue were too intense to let him see anything. The big window beside the door had curtains.

He walked round the house. Aside from a crack in the foundation, the house was well kept. It had a new roof, and the muted yellow paint suited the landscape, like pale yellow goldenrod against the pine forest. Frank had kept the place nice for Hedwig.

Coming back to the front, he saw water glistening three hundred yards down a slope to the left. The Susquehanna, where Hedwig had died.

The dirt road itself stretched down toward the river, and Stan followed it on foot. Halfway between the house and the river he stopped and pressed a heel down on one of the ruts. The road had enough small stones in it to keep it relatively smooth if only cars moved over it. These heavy, wide ruts had been made by a truck. A large one, hauling something into or out of the property. Maybe something worth a hundred fifty thousand dollars or more. Something valuable enough to murder for.

Automatically he moved to the side of the road, where he could duck into the woods if necessary.

As he continued toward the river, he swept the road with his eyes, looking for some sign that Hedwig Washick had walked

this way to her death, or been dragged. Ahead, brush crowded the road. Branches with the shiny green leaves of mountain laurel hung close to its edge, some of them bent and broken as if they'd been struck by a heavy vehicle.

Mountain laurel, he thought, should not be damaged by trucks. It was a magnificent plant, native to these mountains but slowly being eliminated by the rampant building of expensive housing developments for refugees from New Jersey and New York. But then a lot of things in northeastern Pennsylvania were dying off, including people like Frank and Hedwig Washick. Stan wondered why he'd ever returned to these mountains and their sad coal mining history. But the pull had been strong. The pull of a world that had a separate identity in a world where everything was beginning to look alike.

He was almost at the river. He moved farther into the brush and trees and stepped as lightly as he could. Ahead the Susquehanna, low after a dry summer, flowed smoothly toward Chesapeake Bay. The trees thinned out a little, allowing him to see a muddy little beach and rocks strewn along the water's edge.

Among the rocks, facing down-river toward Stan, stood a man in a red plaid shirt.

He ducked behind a pine and peered through its branches.

The man's arms hung at his sides, and their weight seemed to pull down everything above them: his shoulders, his head, and even the muscles of his face.

Stan watched for a moment, thinking of Jack Kerouac's *Ghost of the Susquehanna*.


Then the man's shoulders began to shudder. For a moment, Stan thought Washick intended to dive into the Susquehanna, the mournful Susquehanna. Then he realized that Frank was sobbing.

Feeling like the lowest form of life living in the river's mud, he turned and left.

What he had seen was pure distilled sorrow, not guilt. Someone might have killed Hedwig Washick, but it hadn't been Frank.

He pulled out of the Washick property, trying to persuade himself to head back to town. He felt like driving up highway 60 to the interstate, up to the Scranton-Wilkes-Barre Airport, and taking the first plane out of Pennsylvania.

But as he picked up speed, he saw in his rear view mirror a large tanker truck coming up behind him. It turned onto the Washick property. He noted the New Jersey license number and the color of the cab, a dark



green. He noted, too, that the truck had no markings.

Stan drove straight to the Wilkes-Barre courthouse, where the county records were kept. He loved the courthouse with its columns, pediments, and domes as much as the old library, but he had neither the heart nor the patience for admiration today. He went straight to the Department of Property Records.

Frank had bought the property eighteen years ago, in partnership with Simon Soltis. He'd purchased Soltis's section from an heir after Soltis's death.

Stan read the description of the property attached to a surveyor's map. As was common in the area, the land had once been owned by a mining company, Luzerne Coal and Iron. They had driven a few boreholes on the property, apparently testing for anthracite veins. Nothing unusual there, but Stan now had an idea about the truck and the boreholes. An idea that would explain the caller's reference to poison.

He looked at his watch. Too late to get over to Motor Vehicles. He'd radio them for a check on the license plate, and he'd radio Jim for help. Meantime, he could make it back to the Washick property in twenty minutes if he used the siren. The truck ought to be there still.

On his way to Bloomsville, Stan slowed down around the mountain curves but picked up to eighty on the straightaways. The pines flew by in a haze of green. Twice he had to slow down for other cars and once for a delivery truck full of potato chips coming up from southern Pennsylvania. As he neared the Washick property, he glanced in the rear view mirror, but he knew Jim would be a good ten minutes behind him.

When he started his descent toward the river valley, he shut off the siren. He was five minutes from the dirt road into Washick's place, and he didn't know exactly what to expect. He needed the element of surprise if he had to face armed men.

He approached the dirt road at forty miles an hour. He sped up, wanting to save Frank Washick, and then he slowed down again. No use getting killed in the process.

He eased the car onto the road, peering ahead. The house wasn't visible yet. He ought to wait for Jim. But he couldn't. Not if there was a chance, though he doubted Frank wanted saving.

The car dipped into a pothole and bounced out. He grimaced and slowed down more, hoping no one had heard. He could see flickers of the yellow house through the pines.

He took the last curve slowly,

trying to get some idea where Frank and the truck were, and edged around the pines to the clearing. The green truck was parked on the right side of the road opposite the house.

Stan gunned the motor. The car rocked, then shot up the incline. He skidded to a stop. Dust billowed up around him.

Throwing the door open, he jumped out, pistol up and ready. He swept his eyes from the truck to the porch and stared at Frank Washick.

Frank sat on the third step, a rifle cradled loosely between his knees, barrel pointing up. His eyes were closed. No danger there.

Stan looked back at the truck. The cab was empty. But the door was open, and a body slumped from the truck. The head rested on the dirt road. The feet, clad in cowboy boots with thick heels, still hung up on the floor of the cab. Even from where he stood he could see a dark puddle in the dirt.

With an occasional glance at Frank, he walked up to the body. He stooped and felt the man's neck. No pulse. The truck driver had taken the bullets in the chest. They'd hit the heart, no doubt. He looked at the puddle of blood. It wasn't expanding. The guy had stopped bleeding. He was dead.

Sick at heart, Stan stood up

and walked to over to Frank. Frank opened his eyes and lifted the rifle.

Stan stopped. He and Frank faced off for a full thirty seconds. Then Frank blinked rapidly.

"Let me have the gun," Stan said.

Frank shook his head.

Stan looked back at the dead driver. "He kill Hedwig?"

Frank closed his eyes, then nodded.

"Why?"

Nothing.

"Frank," Stan said.

"Why did you come up here, sheriff?"

Stan knew he had to be straight.

"Somebody called and told me your wife was murdered," he answered.

Frank opened his eyes.

"Yeah."

"I have an idea it was her sister who called. That right?"

Frank nodded.

Stan leaned forward. "Tell me so I can let people know. Otherwise," he lifted his shoulders, "God knows what they'll believe about you and her, Frank. Tell me."

Frank looked up, and a sliver of light came into his eyes. "She made them pay her. She said she'd go to the state authorities if they didn't. We'd be in trouble, too, but the Jersey company

would be bankrupted with the fines."

"Blackm—" Stan stopped. It wasn't the right word now. "She made them pay for her sister, didn't she? She needed the money for her sister."

Frank nodded. "I tried to stop her. I knew what they'd do. But she didn't care about herself." Tears rolled from his eyes. "She asked for the money and then left."

"For Baltimore?"

"Yeah. She didn't tell me that until she got back. She knew they'd come looking for her. She didn't want me to know where she was. She thought that would be better for me. I wouldn't have told them anyway. No matter what they did to make me tell."

Stan nodded. "And so they had to send the money to the bank for her? To keep her quiet."

Frank rubbed his eyes. "Yeah."

"And when she came back, they came after her?" Stan gestured at the driver. Maybe he could stall until Jim got there. He tried not to look at the rifle. Frank had lowered it between his knees again.

"He killed her. He hid out by the house and followed her to the river. He killed her there. I saw the heel marks from those god-damn boots by the porch and by the river. Where Heddie died. She never fell. He pushed her." Frank lifted his head and looked,

blinking, toward the Susquehanna. "By the damned river."

"What were they doing? Dumping toxic stuff into boreholes?"

Frank nodded. "She didn't want them to do it. Neither did Simon. But I knew I couldn't get much more coal out of the shafts Simon and I were working. We were already scraping the support pillars of coal until they were near cracking. And there weren't any jobs for fifty-six-year-old wornout men who didn't know how to do nothing but crack coal. Then, after the accident . . ." He stopped.

"What happened in that mine pocket, Frank? Maybe it's time to tell somebody."

"Yeah," Frank said. "It's time. I never killed Simon. We took too much coal out of a pillar, and it came down. A supporting beam fell across his chest. He gashed his head when he went down." Frank held his breath, then released it with a hollow whoosh. "But I never helped him neither. I thought he was hurt real bad. So I just let him be. After he died, I wanted to close his eyes. He'd been staring at me in that yellow lamplight for . . . for . . . I don't know how long."

"Did you close Simon's eyes?"

"No. I was afraid they wouldn't stay closed. I waited for the lamp to burn out so I wouldn't have to look at his eyes any more. I've never liked the light since then.

Unless Heddie was there to look at. Then it wasn't as bad."

"With Simon gone, you bought his part of the property and let them start dumping?"

"Yeah. Heddie didn't like it. She said she would clean houses or something. I didn't want her to do that. With her weak heart. So she left me for a while.

"But she came back. She didn't like what I was doing, but she knew I couldn't hardly open my eyes without her. Heddie never walked out on anybody what needed her. She kept at me to stop the dumping, but they were paying me pretty good. Besides, I knew I'd gotten into something too deep to dig out of.

"Then, about two months ago, she stopped asking me to stop. She had to help her sister, or her sister would have died. She'd of gone to the law anyway after she got the money. She was planning to. But the bastard got her first."

Frank looked at Stan. "You understand all this? Do ya?"

Stan's blood stopped flowing. He couldn't say no because he did understand. But he couldn't say yes. He figured that was the only thing left that Frank wanted to hear.

"Look, Frank . . ."

"You understand?"

Somewhere behind Stan a mourning dove cooed. He measured the distance between himself and the steps. "Yes, Frank, I

do. I understand." He leapt forward as the rifle went off, the shot booming through the woods.

He stopped and shut his eyes. "Jesus Christ," he whispered, unsure whether it was a curse or a prayer. He heard the sound of an approaching car, turned and walked away from the house.

"What the hell?" Jim said when Stan reached him. "What the hell? I saw you go for him. Did he . . . did he . . ."

"He blew his head off." Stan choked back his lunch. "Call Featherby."

"Why? Did Washick kill his wife?"

Stan shook his head. "Not her. Frank died three years ago. He was just hanging on until she was ready to go, too." For a moment Stan sank into the despair, the guilt, the desperation that had whirled around Hedwig, her husband, and her sister. Then he gestured toward the truck. "Frank executed him. Call Featherby."

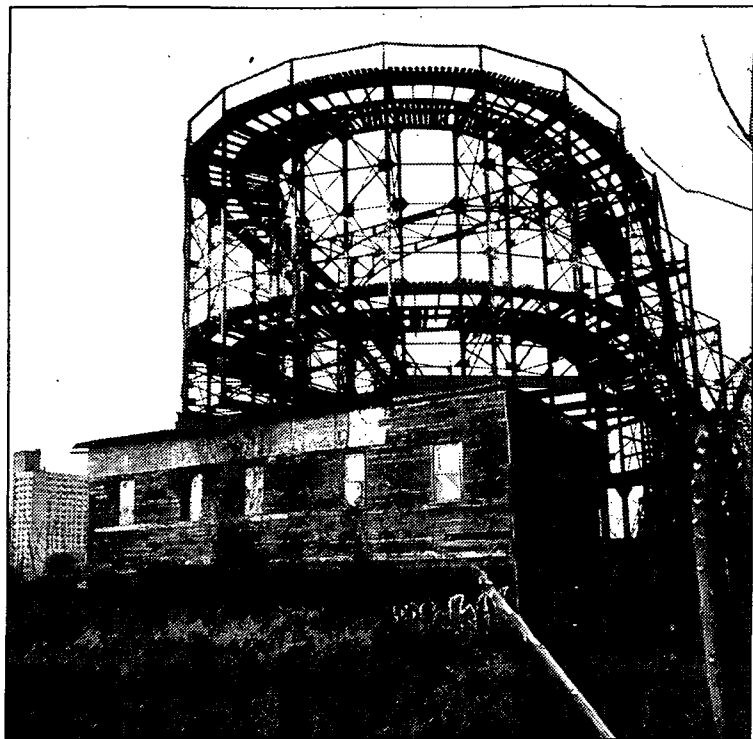
Jim stared at the truck. "Holy cow. What the hell did Frank kill him for?"

"For murder. Call Featherby, okay?"

Jim nodded and climbed back into his car.

Stan walked into the woods and threw up. □

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

Ghost riders in the sky, probably. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020. Please label your entry "April Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the November Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 157.

FICTION

NEST OF EGGS



D. A. McGuire

I don't know why I was thinking of eggs, dinosaur eggs. I don't know why the first thing that came into my mind was something called maiosaur-us, which is a dinosaur that lived somewhere out west, Montana maybe. Anyhow, they've found it laid eggs in nests, raised its young together, maybe lived in communal groups. It seemed a funny thing to be thinking about as I looked down over the edge of the cliff, the one she ran straight off, onto the sandy beach below.

I saw it happen. Three days ago. I'd heard a sound like a sail snapping in a stiff wind, and I'd been confused, wondering why someone was out sailing in the early morning fog. So I'd looked toward the seawall and the edge of the cliff, and as I did, she ran right past me like a ghost, arms clutched to her chest. Her name was Sister Rosemarie, and I'd watched her disappear without a sound, over the side.

I was the first one down there, too, though I knew. The fall was about fifteen feet, not that steep, but the way her body had landed, head turned almost around, I knew she hadn't survived.

I stepped away into the surf when the others arrived. That's where I found the crucifix. It was silver, about six inches long and lying in the sand with bubbles of sea foam washing around it.

I've seen a few dead bodies be-

fore. I'm not squeamish. My mother, friends, even some of my teachers think I should be a doctor. They say I'm logical, pragmatic, unemotional. They think they know me, when truth is they don't know me at all. I'm as emotional as the next guy; it's just that I'm able to put my feelings away, up high on a shelf where they're hard to reach. I can leave them there a long, long time. It makes me, in a word Jake used a few days ago, "dispassionate."

I looked it up in a dictionary; I wasn't happy about being described that way.

"So, she just ran right past you—didn't say anything? Didn't look at you?"

We'd been in his office at the local police station. I was a witness; I had to give a statement. In fact, it wasn't the first statement I'd given that day. I'd already talked to the state police, the medical examiner, and some woman from the county D.A.'s office. "Yeah," I'd muttered. I hadn't been in a very talkative mood.

"And kept running—like she didn't see the edge of the cliff?" Jake went on as he stubbed out the end of his cigarette in a clam shell on his desk.

"Heck, Jake," I'd replied, leaning forward, arms on his desk, "how do I know what she saw? All I know is what I saw, and I

saw this nun come running out of the fog, race past me, and just keep going, until—" I sighed, spun away in his chair. He knew my problem, knew it damn well, but wasn't too concerned with me that day. Nobody was.

Maybe that's the way it should have been.

"Until she hurled herself over the edge?" he'd suggested.

I swiveled the chair back in his direction, met him eye to eye, and said, "The papers say she hurled herself over the edge. I just saw her keep running." I let out a heavy sigh. "Then saw her dead on the beach."

"Not your fault, Herbie," Jake said. In his voice was perhaps just a touch of compassion. "Not your fault at all. You didn't know."

But that's another thing you shove up on that shelf, that feeling that everything you've ever done, ever believed in, is all for nothing. Because just one small action on my part—one small step her way and maybe, just maybe, she wouldn't have kept on running.

So why was I thinking of dinosaur eggs as I stepped back from the rough edge of the cliff and onto the worn cement path of the seawall that ran alongside it? Why was my mind so confused that I wasn't even sure if I was hearing my name being called? And what was I doing out

here at a private girls' school, watching the last of the crime-scene crew scramble over the rocks below? There was the roar of a police launch out in the waves, but the fog was too thick to see it. Then there were some voices shouting, not in excitement but with a kind of finale that said that's it; it's over; we've done all we can here.

Yeah, someone was calling my name, not urgently but with the resignation that meant if you're not ready to go yet, we understand.

I wasn't ready to go. I started to walk along the lip of the cliff down the seawall, figuring I'd take it as far as I could go.

How I first came to be out there, at Hooksham Academy on a bright spring day in late April—ten days ago to be exact—was a strange mixture of coincidence and intent.

Walking into Elmer Hornton's house just as he was taking a call from the Mother Superior of Hooksham Academy was the coincidence.

"The Reverend Mother over at Hooksham," he said, motioning with his head for me to sit down and be quiet. I helped myself to two molasses cookies he'd just made and jumped over the back of his couch. I wasn't very interested in his conversation, and

though I sometimes did odd jobs for him—painting boats, sign repairs, stuff like that—I'd stopped by just to say hi, get a bite to eat. It was spring vacation, and I was off from school and hadn't a lot to do.

I hardly expected to hear him say, "Of course, Evie, love to take the job. Anything for you, dear."

Now, Elmer Hornton has a lot of friends. Maybe it's just the nature of his job: he used to be a signpainter, was now semi-retired. Or maybe it was just the nature of Elmer, for I swear to God he had to be the only man I knew who could get away with calling the head nun of a private girls' school "Evie" and "dear."

"Let me guess," I said as he hung up. "Another favor for an old girlfriend." Then suddenly the wheels started spinning in my head, and before he had time to answer, I jumped off the couch and said, "You got a job out at Hooksham! What is it? Let me help, Mr. Hornton! They've got some boats that need painting? I hear they teach sailing now. Or do they need some signs done?"

He ignored me, through long practice no doubt. "The Mother Superior is an old friend. Went to school with her. She was Evaline Dawkins then, and the prettiest girl at Manamesset Junior High. Took her to the Harvest Fair in '34. The following year

her folks sent her off to private school up in Boston."

It was all I could do not to say, "Been there, done that."

Because if being there when Mr. Hornton took that call was coincidence, this was the intent: I had a friend at Hooksham, a girl named Meggie Charlton, and if Mr. Hornton had a job out there, that meant . . .

Well, I'm no fool. I knew the odds of seeing Meggie at a school covering over forty acres were slim to none. And though I had the week off, classes were still going on at Hooksham. Everyone at my school knew the girls at Hooksham got off earlier in summer because they had no spring break. So unless Meggie was out for a sailing lesson—very unlikely at this time of year—or outside for gym class, there'd be next to no chance of seeing her.

As I crammed a cookie into my mouth and nodded at Mr. Hornton's offer of a glass of milk, I heard him say, "They're having some kind of carnival end of next week, raising money for charity, I guess. Anyhow, they need some signs painted up, tell the parents where to park, point out where the docks are, the tents for all the goings-on they're planning. Plus they have a heck of a lot of buildings. Used to be a commune a hundred years ago. Hooksham brothers started it up but lost all their capital after a few years.

The thing just didn't take, I suppose. Thought they were latter-day Shakers maybe."

"That right?" I said through a mouthful of cookie. I wasn't really interested, but I wanted to keep the subject going.

"Yep. Then it was a tannery, after that a fish-processing plant, and finally it was just abandoned. Town took it over, oh, about '50, '51, seized it for back taxes, didn't know what to do with it, though. Finally sold it to the Sisters of Serenity, Grace, and Hope. Built up quite a good school, good reputation. Evie says they send most their girls on to four-year colleges."

"Evie says, does she?" I said, reaching over the back of the couch as he handed me the glass of milk.

He frowned down at me. "You don't know much local history, do you, boy?"

"Enough to get by, Mr. Horn-ton. So, can you use me?"

"Don't really know, don't . . ." The frown turned into a slowly forming grin. I knew he was going to say yes, I knew he was, but he was going to do a slow torture on me first—and enjoy it. "Won't take two men to put up eight, ten signposts, a couple of "You Are Here" maps. Oh, I can use you for the sanding and the painting of the posts, I suppose. Can't do the lettering; you just ain't a letterer, boy, just don't

have that fine hand-eye coordination." He was squinting at me now and reaching up under a nonexistent cap to scratch his head. "I suppose I could use you for the grunt work, lugging and a'hauling. But I warn you about this: if I *do* decide to take you with me, you got to behave. No leering and winking at the girls. You dress respectably, you behave—well, you just behave. Keep your eyes down, mouth shut. They don't have any men at Hooksham, and other than relatives on visiting day and the good father to say daily Mass, men aren't allowed on school grounds. Even the mailman drops his letters and parcels at the front gate. The sisters are totally independent: they do their own cooking, cleaning, groundwork; they even got a nun who's a licensed electrician."

"Really," I answered. "But they ain't got a painter, do they?"

"I swear, Herbie Sawyer, I don't know where you pick up that godawful grammar. No, they haven't got a painter. Got a little art teacher, French I think, but she don't know diddly about doing up a proper sign that a bunch of American parents can read."

"I'm going, aren't I?" I asked, unable to suppress a smile.

"Wear a white shirt, a tie, and dark pants, no jeans. And some-

thing besides—" he glanced over the back of the couch at my feet "—dirty old sneakers."

"What do you think I'm going to do—show up with green hair and a ring in my nose?"

"You embarrass me, Herbert Sawyer, Jr., and this'll be the last job I take you on."

"For crying out loud," I exclaimed, unable to contain my exasperation. "I'm so straitlaced I make the straitlaced kids look like juvenile delinquents!"

"I know, boy, I know," he said at last, turning away and chuckling. "Makes me worry about you sometimes, it does."

So there we were just three days later, another fine, bright, cold day, taking the long dirt road out to Hooksham Point and Hooksham Academy, set on what Mr. Hornton claimed were forty of the prettiest acres this side of Manamesset Bay. The original community, based on Shaker-style beliefs, had comprised two large dormitory buildings, one for women, one for men; a communal building with dining hall and kitchens; and a large workshop for building farm equipment, the mainstay of the Hooksham Community. There'd also been a school, a chapel, and several barns for the animals they raised—pigs, cows, sheep.

Unfortunately, a combination of poor economic planning and

poor soil for farming ended the Hooksham brothers' Utopian dream. In the following years many of the buildings fell into disrepair, while others were used for canning and processing everything from leather goods to dried squid. By the time the Sisters of Serenity, Grace, and Hope took it over, it was a mess.

It had taken a concerted effort mounted mainly by the sisters to rebuild the property. But slowly they'd opened and improved the dorms, enlarged the chapel, and converted the remaining buildings into classrooms, a gymnasium, a cafeteria, a library, an infirmary, and down by the water a boathouse and pier.

I suppose it was rather an impressive history and I should have been impressed, but as the heavy wrought-iron gates were pulled open by a pair of nuns in gray and white who pointed out where we could park, all I could think about was Meggie.

And the heavy signposts that Mr. Hornton laid over my shoulder. But I said nothing, just gave him a look that conveyed my displeasure. He ignored it, turned instead to the pair of nuns approaching us. Behind them, hurrying up a brick path that led through a small grove of locust trees, was a third nun.

"Mr. Hornton, so good to see you again," the first one said pleasantly, offering him her

hand. "Once more we are in need of your services." She turned to me. "And is this your little helper?"

I might have said something if Mr. Hornton hadn't stepped on my foot. "Yes, sister, he is, but a deaf-mute, poor boy. Where would you like us to start?"

It was the third nun who was the unpleasant one. The first two had been wearing those long gray gowns nuns wear; habits, I think they're called. But neither had been wearing the heavy veil that hides everything but the face. So maybe they were just nuns-in-training. The third had that heavy white veil; it covered her hair, ears, even part of her forehead. She greeted Mr. Hornton with a handshake, thanked him, and, without so much as a glance at me, added, "And the Reverend Mother expects you for tea when you're done, Mr. Hornton. We can find a place . . ." Finally a look at me, in my respectable white shirt, black tie, black pants, even plain, lace-up black shoes that I'd run out and bought last night. " . . . for your assistant. Perhaps the library."

The wind blew up just then, signaling the presence of the sea and probably a heavy surf to the east of us. It was strong enough to blow back her veil and the material of her clothing, making it snap like the sail on a boat or sheets tossing on a clothesline.

But she didn't seem to notice; her sharp, dark eyes were on me. She didn't approve of me, and it wasn't just me; she didn't approve of boys at all.

"Kind of you, sister," Mr. Hornton was saying. He carried a shovel and bucket and one of the smaller signs, a PLEASE KEEP OFF THE GRASS. She turned to lead the way across the grounds. There were brick buildings in the distance, crooked pitch pines and clusters of black locusts sprinkled here and there. There were even wild holly bushes and some blueberry. As we walked along, he growled, "Behave now. Don't speak unless you're spoken to."

"Can't," I quipped, trailing behind and struggling with two heavy signposts over each shoulder. "I'm a deaf-mute, remember?"

The first sign, BOATHOUSE AND DOCKS, complete with a picture of a little yellow sailboat, went in quick and easy. Mr. Hornton dug the hole; I steadied the post; he slid it in; I filled up the hole nice and tight, stamping down the hard gray soil all around it. But the second one was a different story. It was to be placed beside the brick path leading to the chapel, a little church with a gray-tiled roof set somewhat apart from the other buildings on the northeast rim of the prop-

erty, closest to the bay. When Mr. Hornton started to dig, he swore, and then looked around quickly to make sure no one had heard. Rocky soil, a common problem on this side of the cape. He shook his head angrily when I offered to help and started over in a different spot.

That's when I heard a sound behind us—laughter. I turned and confronted what could only be called “a gaggle of girls.”

Six of them, all my age, wearing green and black plaid skirts, knee socks, white blouses, dark blue windbreakers. Books under their arms and smiles on their faces. I nearly dropped my sign and was only slightly aware of Mr. Hornton cursing behind me as he struggled.

One of the girls, the largest, with pale eyes and curly black hair, took a step toward me and swung her skirt just like one of those French girls onstage doing the can-can. They laughed, and another, then two more, then all of them did the same thing—lifted their skirts and swung them as if they thought their knees were something special to see.

And they were doing it for my benefit. Or at least it seemed so. I spun around, half expecting to see Brad Pitt or Tom Cruise behind me. But no, just me, and Mr. Hornton, now down on his knees muttering as he tried to

work a white boulder out of the hole.

I turned around just as the large, dark-haired girl winked at me and a pair of nuns in gray habits and white cowls whipping back in the wind came rushing down the brick path from the other direction. Clapping their hands angrily, they herded the girls away, giving me indignant, offended looks as they did.

“Damn,” I muttered as soon as they were out of earshot. “I didn’t do anything.”

“You watch your language, boy,” Mr. Hornton said, slapping dirt off his hands onto his pants, “and hand me that damn post.”

“Did you see—” I began as I lifted the post.

“Help me get this in,” he barked, and as he did, both his hands slipped down the post. Swearing again—something I won’t repeat here—he let go of it, leaving me to balance it precariously. “I caught a splinter.” He shook his hand, then wiping the dirt from it examined it carefully. Another curse. “Under the skin, deep. Who sanded this one, anyhow?” His small, bright eyes looked at me.

“Not me,” I insisted, putting both hands up, losing the pole, which I then dived forward and caught.

Mr. Hornton cursed again.

“Sit there,” she’d commanded,

pointing at the hard wooden bench. "And don't go anywhere." She had a face as hard and as wooden as the bench itself, covered with a network of finely etched scowl lines that the white cowl and veil did nothing to soften or conceal. Taking Mr. Horton's arm gently, she patted his shoulder and said, "You, poor, poor dear. Let's go take care of this," and guided him through the doorway into the examination room.

This wasn't turning out at all like I'd planned, though I barely knew how I'd planned it. And if it were a combination of coincidence and purposeful intent that had gotten me this far, maybe it was now divine intervention telling me I didn't belong here, helping Mr. Horton or not. He probably could have done this job alone, or with one or two nuns lugging signposts around. They certainly seemed to like *him*.

Besides, there'd been an almost defiant angle to this, too, something I've yet to mention. It went like this: Meggie was here at Hooksham because of me. I'd always suspected it, and she'd finally confirmed it in a letter a few weeks ago. In it she'd written, "You do know why I'm here, don't you? It's because my father thinks you're a bad influence on me."

So probably none of this was a

very good idea. Coming out here. Getting in the way. Upsetting the nuns. Upsetting myself—because sometimes those things you shove way up high on a shelf come tumbling off on their own and there's not a thing you can do about it. I wasn't going to see Meggie. I was probably never going to see Meggie again.

I slumped forward on the bench, elbows on my legs, head in my hands. That's when the most fantastic thing happened, and made me wonder about divine intervention—all over again.

A flicker of red light. A cigarette landed by my feet.

"Not much more any of us can do out here, Herbie," Jake said as he crushed the cigarette on the cement. "And you can't let this eat you up. I told you before, your mother's told you the same; it was not your fault."

I walked to the edge of the seawall, suddenly realizing how terribly dangerous this was—and yet how common walls like this were all over Cape Cod. A narrow walkway not more than three feet across above a cement barrier wall studded with boulders and rocks gathered from the beach below. Water froze out here in winter and got into the

cracks, gradually widening them, which weakened the wall and eventually tore it apart. I'd already walked over two spots where the cement had given way under my feet.

But where Sister Rosemarie had run off the wall, and over the cliff's edge, the walk had been firm, sturdy, no cracks. It was one of the first things Jake checked.

"They going to call it an accident?" I asked him. "I mean, it was foggy. Maybe she lost her sense of direction."

"And suicide's a sin, and much harder to explain to two hundred sets of parents," Jake agreed, lighting another cigarette. My mother wouldn't have liked him smoking. She and Jake had been together for nearly two years, and in that time Jake had done well, quitting at least a dozen times. But he always fell right back whenever a "stubborn case" like this one came along. And though he had the state police and the D.A.'s office working this one, too, it always came back to a matter of pride for Detective Sergeant Jake Valari; he had to know and know for certain why this young woman, Sister Rosemarie, had run to her death off the seawall at Hooksham Academy.

"Accident. Medical examiner seems to be leaning that way," he said with a shrug. "But that

crucifix she was carrying? Came from the chapel's vestry, Herbie, where they keep the school's valuables locked up."

"She was running fast," I said, though it added nothing, meant nothing.

"I know. We've done an analysis of her tracks—she ran over some muddy ground up near the chapel."

"So you're pretty sure she ran from the chapel."

I turned around, though in the deep fog I could barely see six feet in front of me. Like that other day, three days ago.

"Positive. Another nun saw her come out, a Sister . . ." He reached for his notebook in his back pocket, flipped through it, stopped. "Ursula. She was going into the chapel at the time with one of the girls and her parents. She thinks she startled Sister Rosemarie in the vestry. There's a barricade in the back of the vestry; part of it's fenced off, like a cage. You need a key to get in."

"I know. I've seen it," I told him.

Just a nod, no expression of surprise. "The sisters keep the community's most valuable possessions in there, some antique wall crucifixes, paintings, some other things in a chest. There's also a vault with a few items in it. But nothing else was taken. I asked for an inventory. And it was—" More flipping through

the notebook. "—Sister Agnes-Claire who said nothing else was moved or even appeared to be touched."

Three days of police investigation had passed, people interviewed, evidence collected, an entire procedure I'd been only marginally involved in. Oh yes, all the investigators had been civil, but hardly friendly. Yesterday the lady from the D.A.'s office asked me, "Why didn't you try to stop her? Or at the very least shout watch out? I mean, can you tell me why you didn't warn her? You were—" she paused to shuffle briefly through the two and half pages of my statement "—a mere twenty-five feet from the seawall yourself."

"I was waiting for my friend," I said, for probably the twelfth time. I knew enough to keep my story consistent. "I wasn't expecting a nun to come . . . running out of the fog. She startled me. I didn't react. I just didn't . . . react."

The woman had nodded knowingly, almost sympathetically. Or maybe it had been pitying, that look people collect in their faces that says, "But *I* would have. If it had been me, *I* would have done something, anything. *I* would've grabbed her, warned her, stopped her. *I* would have."

The state police had been a little sharper, a little more objective:

"This was right around eight A.M.? You're certain of the time?"

"I had a watch on. I was waiting for a friend." I sighed.

They already knew who the friend was, had verified it.

Still, they had to ask, "You were at the carnival to see this friend, right? And your friend, she was late."

Another sigh, another nod. "She was late."

"So you saw no one else? No one chasing the nun, no one who might have frightened her?"

"No, sir," had been my sorry reply to the investigating officer. "No one. Nothing."

But now, suddenly, I was back again near the spot where she'd fallen. Jake had brought me out here this morning with no explanation; the entire ride out, he'd been quiet, sullen almost.

"Anyhow," Jake went on, barely missing a beat, "this other sister, the one with the parents, went to speak to Sister Rosemarie. The cage door in the vestry was wide open, and it should have been shut, locked. But it wasn't, and there was Sister Rosemarie standing by the chest with one of the crucifixes in her hand." Jake was leafing through his notepad. "Sister Ursula said, and I quote, 'I was momentarily confused. The cage in the vestry is always kept locked. No one is allowed inside without the Reverend Mother's permission. It's

unthinkable! We keep the community's most precious relics in there. So I was confused and didn't know what to say."

Jake looked at me. "That was when Sister Rosemarie darted past her and out through the chapel. The vestry—" I recognized the sound in his voice; he was getting momentarily sidetracked, but it didn't matter. At the moment nothing seemed to matter much. "Interesting place. They added that fenced-in part, the cage, in 1952 when they rebuilt this place. Put a lot of money into it. They keep artifacts, holy items, things the sisters brought from their founding church, which was in . . ." More shuffling through the notebook. "Poland."

"They think Sister Rosemarie was stealing the crucifix?" I had to ask.

"It's been suggested, Herbie," he replied.

I shook my head. Things were spinning wildly in my head. Look, I didn't belong to this religion, didn't really belong to any religion for that matter, but the idea that a young nun might be a suicide—or a thief? It was making me dizzy.

So I really wasn't at my best then, even though I understood why Jake had dragged me out here on a Monday morning when I should have been in school. He wanted my opinion, my view-

point, perhaps in the somewhat deluded belief that I had seen something in the split-second Sister Rosemarie had run past me, something I'd forgotten earlier. But I'd never been a witness to so much as a car accident. I'd always been there after the fact, sometimes years and years after the fact.

"Jake," I said, hoping to appeal to his better sense of proportion, born of years of experience I simply didn't have, "nuns don't steal things, do they?" It sounded ludicrous, no—sacrilegious; just suggesting it made me feel small and cold. "I mean, she *was* carrying that crucifix but—" I shook my head.

He threw down the cigarette, stamped it dead on the cement, and walked toward me. Jake was a big man, what you might call physically imposing. Not obese or fat, just well-built, like he might have been a boxer in an earlier career. But he carried himself well, was quick both physically and mentally, though he was stymied by this one, much as he hated to admit it.

"They keep the cage in the vestry locked," I heard myself saying. "I know. Meggie showed me the day I came out to put up the signs with Mr. Hornton. We . . . we stood there a while in the vestry." Jake was too quiet; listening too intently. "We just talked, Jake." Then another

thought. "The keys. Who has keys to the cage?"

"The Reverend Mother and the school archivist, Sister Agnes-Claire. However, both were able to account for their keys that day, and as far as they know, no one touched or tampered with them."

"As far as they know," I echoed.

"Yeah," he muttered, lighting up another cigarette.

"It is you!"
I'd lifted my head that day in the infirmary, and there she was, coming through the door, closing it, leaning back on it briefly, her eyes on me. Then, before I could draw a breath, she was beside me on the bench.

"Oh, I knew it was you!" she said breathlessly. "I heard the girls talking—they said an old man and a cute, redheaded boy were putting up the signs for the carnival. Then one of them saw you come here. I knew it had to be you and your friend Mr. Hutton."

"Mr. Hornton," I managed to say, stunned to see Meggie Charlton—bright-eyed, vivacious, beautiful Meggie Charlton—pressing close to me, her arm slipping through mine. "He's in there." I pointed toward the examination room. "He got a splinter in his hand and—"

"I can't believe it's you! I just can't!" she cried, then with a quick, cautious look around, dropped her voice to a whisper. "Good thing I only have English lit now—Sister Rosemarie, she's wonderful. She never reports anyone for being late. But you, imagine you—here! Oh, let me look at you! You've changed, there's something—"

She drew away from me, let go of my arm, and, taking my hands in hers, pulled me up with her. I stood, still stunned, for although Meggie had always been two or three inches taller than me, I was suddenly looking straight into her bright, clear blue eyes.

"I knew it!" she cried, voice rising. "Look at you!"

"Look at you, Meggie," I finally said. "You've shrunk."

"No! Oh, you impossible fool!" she laughed, reaching out to touch my cheek. "You've grown! Oh, I should have known with that square jaw you'd be tall! Oh, I didn't make a mistake, did I? All my friends, they teased me for falling in love with one of the shorter boys—but just look at you now!"

"Meggie?" Stunned is too mild a word; I was speechless, in a daze, perhaps hallucinatory.

"Listen, Herbie, your friend will probably take tea with Mother Celestine. I heard her telling Sister Anne this morning

to make the arrangements." A sudden and conspiratorial gleam to her eye, one I knew only too well. "So, when he does, ask to visit the chapel, okay? You know where it is—on the way to the seawall. Pretend you're interested in stained glass or something, anything. I'm on punishment, and I'll be in there praying from two till three." She started to pull away, move toward the door. I squeezed her fingers, wouldn't let her go.

"No," I said. "If you're being punished, I shouldn't—"

"You are impossible," she laughed, tugging her hands free. "It's almost too much fun corrupting you! Here!" She came at me, cupping my face, kissing me quickly on the cheek; before I could react, she was at the door laughing at me. "Oh, Herbie, 'I am the very slave of circumstance, and impulse—borne away with every breath!' Go to the chapel—I'll see you there."

Then she was gone.

"The chapel?" Mr. Hornton had frowned at me like I'd lost my mind.

"I see no reason why he can't visit our chapel. It's quite lovely. Sister Anne!" Mother Celestine, a dignified lady with a white veil and a gray habit of a slightly deeper hue than the other women wore, signaled for a nun to accompany me. "And this, young

man, is a small thank you." She pressed a napkin containing two cookies into my hand. "Sister Anne will bring you something to drink. Just please don't take anything into the nave. There's a cloakroom with a bench just inside the chapel door. You can have your snack there. Then feel free to look about. There may be nuns, or girls at prayer. Please don't disturb them."

"Of course not," I'd whispered, quite in awe of the woman who had once been Evie Dawkins.

Juice bottle in one hand, sugar cookies in the other, Sister Anne had deposited me—without a word, but with a generous smile—in yet another small room with yet another hard wooden bench. I set the food aside, walked to the open doors leading into the nave.

It wasn't a cathedral—I have been in greater buildings and more imposing churches—but it was graceful and elegant. Wood-beamed, high-ceilinged, with ornate woodwork framing a series of four small stained-glass windows showing surprisingly gentle scenes: trees and animals, shepherds and their flocks, an inn that had to be at Bethlehem. But it was empty. Just a faint odor of incense, candle wax, perhaps a mustiness rising from the faded cushions in the rows of twelve, no, fourteen, pews.

"We have Father Christopher come in to say Mass for us. Do

you know who I mean? From the church in town. He's not very old, and a lot of the girls have quite an indecent crush on him."

I turned around. "Meggie."

Meggie dropped her books on the pew farthest back.

"Except for me. I don't need to have a crush on him because when I tell my stories—" A pause, a delicious smile forming on her mouth. "All the girls have stories; they lie, Herbie. They say, oh, I have a boyfriend and he's so cute and he's so smart and he misses me so much; but —" another pause as she studied me — "my stories are real ones. I really do know someone, and some of them have seen you, so now they'll believe me when I tell them all about you, won't they? Even the horrible freshmen girls," her face twisted up a bit, "and the sophomores. They won't laugh any more and say, 'Sure, Meggie, you've got a boyfriend.'"

"Meggie," I said, "I don't want you to get in trouble because of me. Not again."

"Oh, it's not so bad," she said walking past me, her green plaid skirt kicking against her legs. She ran her hands down a wooden pew. "I've learned a lot, really. Did you like what I said to you—when I left the infirmary?"

I shook my head; I was bewildered.

"It was from Byron—don't you

know anything? Haven't you any romance in your soul! The poet! Lord Byron; of course you've heard of him, haven't you?"

"I guess."

"You guess! What about Shelley? Or Keats! Oh, Herbie, they're wonderful! Because if it weren't for them, and Sister Rosemarie, I swear I'd have gone mad months ago!" She threw herself down in a pew. "And now you're here and I'm ruining it, the ten or fifteen minutes we have together, just like I did before."

"I'm sorry you're unhappy, Meggie," I said, meaning it and finally finding words that fit what I wanted to say.

"But I'm not unhappy!" she cried. "Oh, come sit with me! If we can only share these few minutes, let me tell you . . ."

So I did, and she took both my hands in hers, clutching them very tightly.

"I've changed, Herbie. I can't say exactly how I've changed," she said, her voice, her breath frenetic, her eyes bright, eager, vibrant. "Though I give Sister Rosemarie all the credit. She's had such an effect on me. If you could see her—she's very pretty and not the type you'd expect to be a nun, not that nuns have to be ugly or plain, but she's so special. She tells us such wonderful stories, Herbie! Her fa-

ther was an entertainer, can you imagine? And she grew up in hotels and inns all over the world. She has this one story that I really love, and I must tell you. I think *you'll* appreciate it." She frowned, studied me, drew back again as she had earlier in the infirmary. "I don't think you'll laugh at it. Do you know how unusual that is? Most boys aren't like you, Herbie. Most boys would be telling me to shut up and trying to kiss me . . . or something."

I squeezed her hands in mine. "Tell me the story."

"She calls it *The Nest of Eggs*." A perfect little smile; it was all I could do not to tell her to shut up. "Her father was performing in the Catskills, you see, and she got friendly with a boy—just friends, they were only ten or eleven and . . . anyhow, this boy loved to explore the woods, the mountains, kind of like you do, Herbie, out here on the Cape. The marshes and beaches. But anyhow, he found a nest of eggs in the woods under some leaves and twigs, and he showed it to her. They were very excited about it—there are woodcocks in the woods there, so they thought they'd found a woodcock nest. They guarded it and checked it every day, very carefully so they wouldn't frighten the mother and father woodcock, if they were around, that is. They were

afraid the nest would be . . . abandoned. Anyhow . . ." Her face darkened, she turned away briefly; I squeezed her fingers. "It's a stupid story. I don't know why I'm telling you."

"Tell me, Meggie," I urged her.

"I talk too much. I ramble on and on. I get in trouble for talking. After lights out. During quiet prayers. During dinner, during . . ." She shook her head.

"Tell me the rest, Meggie." Suddenly I did want to hear it because I wanted to hear her voice saying anything.

"Well, they came back one day to check the nest, and the eggs were hatching. Oh, Herbie, Sister Rosemarie hates to tell this part; it terrifies her but it excites her, too, just like it does when she reads Byron. You should hear her recite Lord Byron: 'She walks in beauty, like the night of cloudless climes and starry skies—'"

Being this close, listening to her, touching her, even smelling her, was killing me. My heart was in my throat; my pulse was ringing in my ears.

"Well, there weren't any woodcocks in those eggs." She turned back to me, eyelids lowered. "There were snakes. Snake eggs, Herbie. They'd found a nest of snake eggs in the woods. Sister Rosemarie, she went running down the hill screaming while her friend laughed at her. I

wouldn't be afraid, though, because I'm not afraid of snakes. In fact, I think I'd rather like a little pet snake, a green one—wear it around my wrist right here,” she thrust out her arm at me, “like a bracelet. Are you afraid of snakes, Herbie?”

“No,” I told her, realizing that her other hand was trembling in mine.

“Then are you afraid of this: I told you I've changed. A lot. More than you probably want to hear. I really think next year when I'm a freshman I shall enter this program they have here. It's a special program for girls interested in entering the community of sisters. Yes. I'm seriously thinking of becoming a nun.”

“No!”

And to that she laughed, stood up and backed away from me down the row of pews, then stopped and laughed again. For a moment I didn't know if she was joking—grotesquely joking—or if she was serious.

“What a story I'll have now,” she said to me. “You're angry, aren't you? But I'm serious, Herbie; I really am.”

“You can't be.” I said, standing, moving toward her.

“Oh, Herbie, you don't know what it's been like here. I told you, I thought I'd go mad! Until I started to feel like I belonged, that I had people who cared, really cared, about me. Some of the

sisters are dreadful, there's no doubt about that; but there are others—it's like I've found the family I never had. Reverend Mother is strict but so gentle, so caring, and Sister Rosemarie is more like a real sister, or even a mother, to me. I've never had that, Herbie. You—you've got your family; you've got your mother and Jake and even your signpainter friend. He's like a grandfather, isn't he? But here I have—oh, I didn't want to tell you like this! I wanted to write to you! Then you could read it over and over and it would sink in and you'd have to accept it!” And with that she turned and ran up the row of pews, and then down the aisle leading to the altar.

“Eggs,” I murmured. “Now I remember.”

The sound of the launch was fading in the distance, and the fog was threatening to lift: brightness in the distance, a vague whiteness in the skies above. But Jake heard me, was standing right beside me, echoing, “Eggs?”

“She ran down the hill when she found—” I looked back toward the school in the general direction of a distant, vague shape, a sturdy, brick building, a chapel built over a hundred years ago by two men hoping to create a perfect society. “Jake,

would it be all right if I went to the vestry, took a look in the cage? I won't touch anything."

"Sure." Another cigarette dropped to the ground, stamped out. "Why not?"

"You don't believe me, do you?" Meggie said. I'd followed her, crossing in front of the altar and through a door leading to a small room in back. There were cloaks and robes hanging on hooks, probably for the visiting priests who came to say Mass. There was also a fenced-in part of the room in back. Inside it I could see what looked like a row of crucifixes, some small, faded paintings, a large object that looked like a sea chest, and a door about two feet high with a metal handle. A vault.

"You think it's just some foolish, adolescent fantasy, don't you? You're going to tell me I'm not old enough to know what I want, that I've been seduced by a way of life I've never had." She walked deliberately away from me and toward that fenced-in area. Enclosed by bars, it was like a prison cell, and she turned around in front of it.

"I'm not going to tell you anything," I said quite honestly—because (quite honestly again) I had no idea what she was talking about. For a minute I wanted to tell her she'd been watching too many soap operas.

But there was always that element about Meggie Charlton, from the fantastic to the mundane. One moment wildly, almost crazily melodramatic; the next as calm, as rational, and as irritating as Mr. Hornton himself.

"You don't think I'm crazy?" she asked, sounding a little shocked.

"No. Maybe a little mixed up but definitely not crazy."

"Really?" She cocked her head, looked disappointed.

"Really. But I also think you're way too young to know what you want to do the rest of your life. For crying out loud, Meggie, you're only fourteen."

"I'm fifteen, Herbie," she said indignantly. "And I do know. I do." She turned her face away from me, looked through the bars at the wall of crucifixes. "This is the cage," she explained to me. "They keep all their special things in the cage. Sometimes they have to sell one of them—" a pause as she wiped her face with the sleeve of her jacket "—to pay a bill or to send money to one of their missions overseas. I heard them one night talking, the Reverend Mother and Sister Agnes-Claire." An angry, hard-eyed look back at me. "Bet that surprises you, doesn't it? Bet you thought they had loads of money, didn't you?"

I shook my head.

"Because that's why we're having the carnival, to raise money for the charities we support." Slowly her voice softened, sounded tired, and her eyes looked wet. "The carnival—you'll come, won't you? It's next Friday through Sunday noon; everyone's parents will be here. Oh, except for mine. My father is away, and my mother, well, she said she wouldn't know anyone and that would make her feel uncomfortable." A casual wave of the hand. "Anyhow, it really should be a lot of fun, Herbie. There's going to be an auction and a crafts fair. I've made some really horrible pot-holders." A sad little laugh. "And there'll be skits and plays and a special breakfast we girls are going to cook and a buffet supper that we won't—it's going to be catered! And a dance Friday night. You should hear us laugh about that!" Her face brightened for a moment, blue eyes sparkling. "Who are we going to dance with? Each other's brothers?" Then a sudden pause; her eyes were filled with tears. "You can dance, can't you?"

Memories of last year's gym class: folk dancing, square dancing, and the inevitable ballroom dancing—

"Yeah," I told her. "Kind of."

"I'm in a skit, too." She licked her lips anxiously. "Sister Rosemarie helped us with it—an

adaptation of scenes from some of Shakespeare's plays. I'm Juliet in the dying scene?" She rubbed her eyes suddenly with the back of her hand, then grabbed hold of a bar and said, "They used to terrify me. The crucifixes. I hated them. Isn't that awful? I told my mother that when I was a little girl, and it upset her. The whole idea of a crucifix, I just hated it, but . . ."

She looked back inside the cage. "Oh, Herbie, you're right. You're always right. That's why I hate *you* so! I am mixed up! And confused! You're so horribly level-headed and normal and sane, and that's why I absolutely hate you! I really do! I mean, why did it have to be you here with that old man? I was late to class because of you, you know? And if it had been Sister Helen in math, or Mary-Therese in chemistry or even Agnes-Claire in history, I'd have been written up and I'd be down here saying a hundred, a thousand, no, a million Hail Marys, but no, no, it was her, Rosemarie, and she didn't even raise her voice at me, she just said, take your seat, Miss Charlton, and I'll be right with you. Do you understand? She said I'll be right with you—which meant she was going to help me catch up with the rest of the class without expecting any explanation for being late!

Who is she? Who is she to treat me so well?"

I glanced at the crucifixes on the wall inside the cage and knew the smartest, safest thing for me to do would be to just turn around and walk out, go find Mr. Hornton, go home. Yes, just turn and walk out, leave, forget her, forget I'd ever wanted to come here, see her, be with her if just for a minute, or a moment of time that could only make things more difficult for her. Things were difficult enough already.

"I told Sister Rosemarie about my . . . crucifix thing and she showed me that one," Meggie said suddenly, breaking the momentary silence. "The last one on the right, the silver one." She wiped her eyes with the back of her wrist. "She said someday she'd take it down and let me hold it. It came from a church in Poland. That's where the mother church used to be until it was burned down." Her voice was shaking. "The Germans burned it during the war and . . . well, some of these things are from that church. It hurts the sisters so when they have to sell any of them. There's an icon in there, in that vault, and it's very, very valuable."

Her eyes were filling up more; she couldn't keep up with it, was rubbing both eyes with the back of her sleeves.

"But the nuns, you see, were

very brave. They smuggled out whatever they could because they knew that to rebuild their church and their community, they'd need to sell—oh, Herbie, I think they're so incredibly brave! I want nothing more than to be like them, to be part of them, and—"

That's when she kind of slumped down and I dived forward, catching her.

But had it all been just an act? An elaborate charade of some kind? I didn't know and possibly didn't care as she whispered against my shoulder, "Oh, Herbie, why'd you have to come today? I thought I knew everything I wanted until—" Then she turned her face toward mine and let me kiss her.

I put my hand on the barred gate, pulled at it angrily, then felt a hand slap down on my arm. Jake, jingling the keys in my face.

"Damn it, Jake," I asked him. "Did you ever hate the place you are, the person you are—the age you are?"

"I'm not crazy about being forty-nine if that's what you're asking me, Herbie-boy" was his jocular answer as he fitted the old fashioned skeleton key into the padlock, lifted the latch, and pulled the cage door open.

"So the door was open. She was in here. She took down the

crucifix." I pointed out its location, a faded spot on the wall above us. I turned around. "Then she heard Sister Ursula coming from the nave." A turn toward the corridor leading to the main chapel. "If she wanted to take—to steal—to borrow—" What word fit? What word was appropriate?

And why was my head spinning off in one direction when I was trying to turn it in another? I needed to reason this out, felt that it was right there—or up there, tucked away with everything else I set aside, refused to look at, like the body of a young nun lying on the sand, a young nun that a young girl, a wonderful fifteen-year-old girl, had adored, revered, admired.

For if Sister Rosemarie so deeply touched Meggie, to the extent that Meggie wanted to be a nun, what would Sister Rosemarie's death do to Meggie? And worse, what if it were suicide, what then? Would the disappointment, or worse, the disillusionment be so great that . . .

Another thing to shove up on the shelf? But what if I couldn't? "Damn," I softly swore, but Jake said nothing, was strangely silent.

Because I couldn't; I couldn't shove Meggie aside so easily. She was there in the vestry with me; her faith, her trust, her vulnerability, and her capacity to

love and believe in someone else—and that someone else wasn't me.

"It couldn't have been suicide," I heard myself saying. "It was too fast, too spontaneous."

I turned around slowly, eyes running over the remaining crucifixes. Porcelain crucifixes. Some with jewels. Others with chipped paint. Then the paintings. Of churches, a woodland scene with a cross against a tree, angels, saints.

No, not suicide, because Sister Rosemarie knew—even in the fog—that the seawall and the cliff's edge were there. It had to be something else entirely, something more transient, something that had happened suddenly and without warning. A nun who as a child ran from a nest of snakes that had terrified her; what else would cause that same woman—no, would cause the child in that woman—to race with the same terror through the fog, clutching a silver crucifix to her chest?

"Yes," I murmured, remembering suddenly a detail so small it had barely seemed significant at the time. I looked at Jake, then at the quiet, dignified face of the nun in the doorway behind him. The Mother Superior, crossing herself quietly before she came in. She was with Sister Agnes-Claire.

"She was holding it to her

chest; tightly. The crucifix," I told them. "I remember now."

"Of course she was," Mother Celestine said, striding across her office in the administration building opposite the larger of two classroom buildings. Her eyes fell on me. Gray eyes, I think, and very soft, very gentle, also very firm. I'd learned to be careful with quick judgments; this woman ran a school, an entire complex of nuns, students, and all that went with it—she had to be anything but soft. "Holding it tightly." She said this to me as though I were the only one there with her. "She admired that particular crucifix very much. Indeed, she'd asked to hold it when she was in the vestry with me—and you, too, sister?" She glanced at the other nun, Sister Agnes-Claire, the one with the wrinkled face. Only minutes earlier the Reverend Mother had asked Jake to accompany her here, saying she had something to ask him.

So in silence like a solemn promenade across the fog-drenched campus we'd walked, Jake and I behind the two nuns. The school was quiet. Some parents had taken their daughters home, the rest were waiting in town or by their phones, anxious to hear what the verdict regarding Sister Rosemarie's death would be. Death by accident, or

something else. Today, Monday morning, most of the girls and staff were preparing to attend a memorial service at the larger church in town. A row of orange school buses could just be seen beyond the gymnasium in the gray fog.

"Yes, Reverend Mother," Sister Agnes-Claire replied with a nod of her head. "But of course I refused." Her tone was peremptory, not unlike teachers I knew who seemed personally insulted by the simplest requests: to borrow a pencil, get a drink of water, use the bathroom. "Sister Rosemarie often—" Her eyes darted across the large, dark room to Mother Celestine, who with a tip of her head indicated that Sister Agnes-Claire should continue. "Sister Rosemarie often expressed interest in the items in the cage. She was very inquisitive. Intelligent, too, and conscientious. She was a fine teacher, if sometimes a bit too lenient in her methods. But she was also—" A drop in her voice, a pause.

"We have talked about this, sister, and we have decided it is best the police know." Mother Celestine turned to Jake. He was standing uncomfortably by the windows overlooking the grounds.

"This will sound unkind," Sister Agnes-Claire said, "but it's

accurate. Sister Rosemarie was covetous."

"Covetous?" That got Jake's attention. He turned to the woman.

"Please do not misunderstand, sergeant," said Mother Celestine. "We loved our sister deeply, and we are greatly saddened by her death. But we must also remember her as she was; it behooves us not to create an image of her that is untrue. Sister Rosemarie was a vain young woman. She could not simply admire a lovely crucifix on a wall. She wanted to have it."

"Are you saying she stole that cross and that—and that—" I was so upset I could barely push the words out "—because she got caught . . ."

The Reverend Mother turned to me, this time with exasperation in her eyes. "I know, young man, that you were the last to see Sister Rosemarie alive, but perhaps your part here is done? Sergeant?" She looked at Jake.

But Jake had three words for her as he came away from the windows. "The boy stays."

"Then I will answer the boy," she said to Jake curtly. "Yes. Yes, it is our sad conclusion that one of our own community, after being caught in an act of theft, ran away in shame and disgrace. The morning was densely overcast. She became disoriented and, losing her sense of direc-

tion, fell off the cliff. And we are asking you now, Sergeant Valari, as the investigating officer in charge, to come to the same conclusion. Sister Rosemarie's death, tragic as it was, was most certainly an accident."

Jake said nothing, not a word. A clock over the mantel suddenly became audible, ticking away like a tiny heartbeat, or like the pulse in the side of my throat. Seconds ticked by as she stared silently at Jake. Then a full minute.

"Sergeant," she said at last. "I have spoken to the district attorney's office, as well as the state police commissioner, asking that either or both of them come to the same conclusion, but they have informed me that *you*—" she said the next words as though they tasted bitter in her mouth "—are still the officer in charge here. I've also tried to reach your captain but—"

"He's in Alaska," Jake interrupted curtly. "Vacation."

He lifted his hand to his jacket, patted its pockets, and then stopped.

"At any rate, we are asking you, at the very least, to come to a speedy decision in this matter. You have the facts. You've interviewed everyone on my faculty and staff. You've the—" a glance in my direction again; suddenly the gray in her eyes didn't look quite so soft or so gentle; it

looked like steel “—boy’s statement and Sister Ursula’s. You have the physical evidence, the crucifix that was taken. What more do you need?”

“Reverend Mother,” Jake said slowly, rolling out the syllables as he did, “with all due respect, do I detect a bit of nervous apprehension in your voice?”

“Certainly not,” she said, too angrily, too sharply, as though she were addressing, perhaps, one of the girls, or a subordinate nun. She was upset, though; anyone could see it. Yes, upset that after appealing to what she perceived as the higher authorities, she’d been told she had to deal with Jake, whom maybe up to now she’d merely tolerated. “I simply wish to bring this to a speedy conclusion. I have a school here. I am responsible for over two hundred impressionable young girls who will now need, in many cases, counseling, attention, and care to help them through this tragedy. And for the police, for anyone in authority, to dare suggest that Sister Rosemarie’s death was anything *other* than an accident would be adding tragedy to tragedy.”

“Oh, we know she wasn’t pushed, Reverend Mother.” Jake wasn’t looking at me, but I felt it, I knew his attention was focused on me. “But there are always *other* possible explanations—aren’t there?”

“What other—” She looked distracted a moment, glanced at Sister Agnes-Claire, but she was of no help. If anything, the sister was looking to her for support. “Are you suggesting—”

She caught her breath, looked almost frantic, but before our eyes, the panic in her voice turned to indignation. “Not suicide. It was not suicide, sergeant. If nothing else, *that* you should have eliminated. Our sister had no problems, no depression, no disorders of any kind. You’ve spoken to her friends, the sisters with whom she taught, her physician, even some of her students. And every one of them should have caused you to reach one conclusion. Sister Rosemarie was, physically and mentally, a very healthy young woman.”

“But covetous,” Jake added, and though I couldn’t see his line of sight from where I stood, I knew he was looking in Sister Agnes-Claire’s direction. “Listen, Reverend Mother, and with all due respect again, I’m aware that a group of parents has approached you with plans for a scholarship fund. It’s to be set up in the dead woman’s name—as long as her death not be found a suicide. Apparently they have no qualms about her having been a thief?”

“You’re very thorough, aren’t you, sergeant?” she shot back, voice barely quivering.

"No, not thorough enough, because I'll tell you this. I'm not closing this case until I know how she got in the cage that morning—without a key—and just exactly what she was doing in there. Only then will I close it."

I pulled on the door handle of Jake's red Firebird. We were going, and suddenly I wanted nothing more than to get out of this place. That's when I heard my name ring out and turning around saw Meggie running toward me. Behind her in the fog girls were boarding buses to attend the memorial service in town.

"Herbie." Then she was there before me, a space of six or seven feet between us. Jake coughed and turned away. Meggie raised her eyes to him, then they fell back on me.

What had I expected? That she'd be lost and frightened, inconsolably grief-stricken? I knew so little of women in general, and now, facing her there like that, I had no idea what to do, what to say. The girls she was with had paused, were watching us from across the parking lot. Only a matter of time and one of the teachers was certain to notice, too.

So I said the only thing I could think of to say—"I'm sorry, Meggie"—never knowing that was

the one thing I should have said. Sometimes I get it right.

"I know you're doing everything you can," she said, her eyes addressing me and Jake both. Raising one hand to show me, she said, "Look at me, Herbie. I'm trembling. Can you believe it? Can you—"

A sharp cry from across the parking lot suddenly: "Miss Charlton!"

She didn't so much as look, or turn; instead she took a step toward me and, whispering, said, "I've changed my mind, Herbie, and not because of Sister Rosemarie. I'm not going to be a nun. You see, I couldn't ever—" her eyes dropped, almost shyly, then flew back up to look at me "—do that and be in love with you, could I?"

Ten days ago I had been riding home with Mr. Hornton in his old pickup. I'd given up trying to find a decent radio station and suddenly blurted out, "Parents stink, don't they? They can really louse up your whole life."

We'd finished the signs, the nuns were happy, and no one had caught me and Meggie in the vestry. She'd left just as Mr. Hornton came into the chapel and found me sitting in the back pew.

Now we were coming up on the shore road. Mr. Hornton

downshifted his old truck; it shook and trembled.

"Didn't know you were having problems with your mother," he said.

"You know I'm not talking about her," I said angrily.

"Get a lot of praying done, did you?" he said, changing the subject. I guess he'd seen Meggie leaving. "Didn't know you were the prayerful type."

"Prayerful type? Just what the heck is a prayerful type? I swear, Mr. Hornton, you say some pretty strange things sometimes. You know darn well I wasn't in there praying."

"I just hope you weren't in there doing something you need to be praying about," he said, this time with a serious tone in his voice I couldn't ignore.

I glanced at him and he looked back at me with a frown.

"Okay, so we planned to meet there but we just talked and . . . Don't you know me by now?" I shook my head and stared out the windows. "Can we get something to eat? I'm starved."

But he was quiet, too quiet.

"Okay! So I kissed her! But just once! Nothing big. I don't even know why I did. I just did. In the chapel. So go on, report me. Call the police. The papers. Tell my mother. Tell the world." I looked at him defiantly; his sober expression hadn't changed.

"But I tell you what, I'd do it again—in a minute."

"So you kissed a girl—in a church." He started shaking his head as a slow, sinister grin moved across his smug old face. "Well, Herbie-boy, there's hope for you. Dagnabbit, there's hope for you yet!"

"You're one dirty old man, Mr. Hornton, and I have no idea why my mother lets me work for you."

But the tension was gone, broken like a popped balloon.

"Look, I'll tell you the truth. It's this: Meggie's real mixed up, and I know I'm just a kid but I can tell she is. If it weren't for this one nun who's been real good to her, taken her under her wing and stuff . . ." I felt funny saying all this, but I had to.

"Meggie hasn't got anyone going to the carnival for her. Her parents are jerks. So I was thinking . . ."

"Sure enough." He reached out to slap my arm. "Be glad to. Give your girl someone to make breakfast for, show off for. Tell me what she's made for the crafts fair—I'll buy 'em all up. Promise."

Of course I was relieved, and grateful, but he'd said two words that startled me. "Your—my girl?"

"There's an old saying, Herbie; you kiss a girl in church and she's yours forever."

"I never heard that one, Mr. Hornton."

"Course not. Just made it up, but sounds pretty good, don't it?"

"Sister Rosemarie," I said after a long silence, "she have any family?"

"A Mrs. Andrew McNeil, step-sister. Had her into the station yesterday, had a nice chat." Jake shrugged, turned the heater in the car on low. "But she couldn't help, Herbie; she hadn't seen her sister in a long time."

"Did you ask about her parents? Her family background?" I asked hopefully, but I already knew the answer to that. If there was anything there, he would already have acted on it.

"Her father was in the entertainment business, booked acts, worked as an agent. Her mother sewed costumes." Another shrug. "Her sister is staying out at the Red Lion Motel, couldn't get a better room. All the good places in town are filled up with parents of girls attending Hooksham."

He turned into my driveway. "I felt kind of sorry for her. Nice lady, but kind of lost."

"I know the feeling," I murmured as I got out.

"I'll stop by later tonight," Jake said. "And if you think you want to attend the funeral—" He left it open. I shoved my hands

into my pockets, nodded, understood.

I called ahead first, spoke to a soft-voiced but strangely forceful woman on the other end. I could hear the confusion in her voice. She had a memorial service to attend, she reminded me, but could spare me a few minutes. She'd tell the motel manager to send me right up if I could get there within twenty minutes, but after that she'd be gone.

I don't drive. I'm only fourteen. To get downtown meant a good forty minutes' walking time. But I was in luck; a friend of Mr. Hornton's was going by in his truck, boat trailer hitched to the back, and I flagged him down. Of course I had to endure his questions: "Ain't you supposed to be in school, Herbie?" followed by, "Damn, boy, you do get in some godawful messes, don't you? Heard you were right there on the seawall when that nun went flying over. What are the odds, do you think, of always being in the right place at the right time?"

I had nothing to say to the man and, after getting dropped at the inn, thanked him and went in.

I was sure Jake had already asked the woman if Sister Rosemarie had written to her recently and if there had been any sign

of unhappiness, depression, whatever, in her letters. Jake is very thorough.

So if anyone asked me why I went to see her, I wouldn't have had an answer. Maybe it had to do with that shelf stuck way above my head; I was feeling crummy about everything. Meggie. The nun's death. And the fact that I'd stood there helplessly as she went flying past me over the cliff.

Mrs. McNeil was a small but sturdy-looking woman with a full, pale face, and dark brown hair streaked through with gray. She wasn't beautiful, but she wasn't unattractive either. She had a forcible, almost striking, pair of dark eyes that looked right through me when she spoke.

"What can I do for you, young man?"

"I don't know," I hesitated, "that you can do anything for me, ma'am. Maybe I'm just here . . ." I drew in a breath; she was being patient, a patience that would quickly wear thin. ". . . to say I'm sorry. I wish I could have done something."

"How could you have done anything?" she snapped. "Did you know a nun was going to come running at you out of the fog? You're just lucky she didn't take you over with her, aren't you?" She stepped away from the door and, gesturing inside, said,

"Well come on in. I've never liked standing on the threshold."

"Just the same, ma'am, I still felt pretty useless."

"I talked to the local police sergeant," she said, walking in, picking up a raincoat, umbrella. "Went down to the police station and we had a nice long talk. But it was such a shame, such a shame. I almost didn't know Sandra anymore, and I had to tell him that. If you think you feel useless," she turned to look at me, "imagine how I feel. I hadn't seen my sister in twelve years."

"I didn't know."

"And how would you know?" she snapped again. She looked around the rather shabby motel room. A small bed, a dresser strewn with personal items: brush and comb, a picture in a frame lying face down, a paperback novel. "She chose a different life, one I accepted, but I always thought she was happy in it. Perhaps she wasn't. Well, I'm sorry I can't talk longer. I have a service to attend. Thank you for coming to see me."

My cue to leave; she draped the coat over her arm.

"Did Jake . . . did Sergeant Valari tell you that one explanation for her death is that she was caught stealing a crucifix from the school chapel? And that she ran off into the fog, frightened, ashamed, whatever, and lost her bearings?" I stopped; the look

she was giving me was answer enough.

"Yes. It's very sad. I hope the police decide not to include that in their report. If the sisters can overlook it, forgive a . . . momentary lapse—" She dropped her head briefly, then looked back up at me. "She liked beautiful things. She liked to go into our mother's jewelry box, touch her bracelets, put them on." Her eyes looked sad suddenly, misty. This was an unmistakably proud woman. None of this was easy for her.

She walked over to the dresser, picked up the framed picture there, and looked at it. I was just behind her, preparing to leave. I'd intruded enough, but I looked up and saw in the picture—the photograph—the answer.

Or part of it.

Not the answer to the eggs, the snake eggs, no, but the other part, the question Jake wanted answered. And just maybe it would lead to the final answer, too.

"Mrs. McNeil," I said, breathlessly. "Is that—is that her, your sister and—"

For the photograph was of a man in a black cape with a red lining and a black silk top hat. He was holding two small girls in spangled costumes on his lap, one on each knee.

"Yes, me and Sandy on our father's lap," she answered.

"But didn't you tell Jake . . ." I said, then remembered what Meggie had told me: "Her father was an entertainer, can you imagine?" "Mrs. McNeil, you told Jake that your father—your stepfather—was an agent?"

"Well, he was," she said. She looked at the photograph lovingly. "But when he was young, he was a magician." A little smile. "Not a very good magician, but he always had work. He actually preferred the term 'illusionist.'" The smile grew larger, lighting up her face. "He made Sandy and me disappear more than once. Sawed our mother in half six nights a week and twice on Saturday."

"And did he do any escape acts—you know, with ropes or chains or padlocks?"

"Yes." Her eyes brightened as she looked at me.

"And did he teach you and—"

She finished for me, "Sandy how to do the same? Yes, of course, though Sandy was better than I." Her face suddenly dropped; she was reading the expression on mine. "Young man, what has any of this to do with my sister's death?"

There is an advantage, I suppose, to questioning witnesses, family members, whoever might shed light on a case, down at the police station. Put them in your environment, and you're more apt to be the one in control of

the situation. I understood that. But there are also times when you need to step into their world, and in this framed picture was a small, missing part of Sister Rosemarie's world, her childhood, part of which was spent as the daughter of a magician.

Because if Jake had been here in my place, I like to think that this is what he would have asked Mrs. McNeil:

"You said 'illusionist,' Mrs. McNeil," I said, answering her question with one of my own. "And an illusion is a false image, isn't it? The crucifix your sister supposedly took—did Jake tell you where it was kept?"

"Jake—" But she understood. "Sergeant Valari said it was in the vestry."

"In a locked area of the vestry called the cage."

"Locked?"

"Yes, and your sister didn't have a key."

"If it were locked with a simple padlock, or even an older door lock, Sandy would have had no problem opening it." Her face darkened. But what did this prove, she wanted to know? Except to explain how Sister Rosemarie had gotten the crucifix? Indeed, it only worsened the case against her sister.

"Illusionist," I said again. "Mrs. McNeil, I think your sister saw something else in the cage. Something I can't see, or the po-

lice. Something that maybe only the daughter of an illusionist can see. Would you come out to Hooksham with me?"

She wasn't sure—she wasn't sure at all. I saw it written all over her face.

"Do you know the story about your sister and the snake eggs?" I said. "Please, Mrs. McNeil, I think your sister saw snake eggs—again. Please come to Hooksham with me."

"I'm really out of practice," she told me, working the twisted paper clip into the padlock. "And this is breaking and entering, isn't it, young man?" She looked up at me ruefully, possibly wondering how she'd been rooked into this.

"The police are done here," I said, talking to her but mostly talking to myself. "They didn't even do fingerprints; there was no reason to. They looked around, took some pictures." I shrugged as she tugged at the heavy padlock—and it opened.

"It's an easy one," she said. "Old."

"Nineteen fifty-two," I said, then stepped inside. The row of five crucifixes were all still there; the paintings in a little row. I walked over to the waist-high door with the metal handle, lifted it realizing that if there were any kind of alarm system

here my goose was cooked. But nothing. I looked at Mrs. McNeil, and she shook her head.

"Could she have gotten into this?" I asked.

"Maybe. I doubt it. We were taught to pick locks, not work on combination locks, but I don't know." She was growing impatient, uneasy.

"Well, just look around," I said to her, aware my voice had a funny, almost whiny sound to it. I'd thought that maybe she'd just step into the cage and say, "Yes, that painting looks funny, or that crucifix, or that . . ."

Her eyes fell on it before mine did, the chest on the floor in the corner. No padlock on it. Nothing. I went over to it and with only a slight hesitation, lifted the top. I knew Jake must have done the same thing three days ago.

It was filled with candlesticks, metal cups, and something underneath wrapped up in paper and string. I lifted things out carefully, one at a time, placing them on the floor. Then I picked up the object wrapped in paper. It was pieces of a broken cross, carefully kept together. I laid it on the floor with the rest, then, reaching in, tried to find if the chest had a false back or bottom or hidden panel, anything.

"He had an old trunk like this one," she said to me. She was standing next to me looking

down at the assortment of relics, both holy and precious, maybe some even from Poland taken out at the beginning of World War II almost sixty years ago. She looked at me, a pained and chagrined expression on her face. "You lied to the nice nun at the gate, young man. You told her I was your mother and you were here to retrieve the coat you left in the chapel. I think now we should go apologize to the woman and leave."

"Who had a trunk like this one?" I asked as I continued to feel around the inside of the chest: sides, top, bottom, back. But nothing, nothing, nothing.

She sighed, gave a tired laugh, and walked away from me, sitting down on the edge of a small iron chair in the cage. "I don't even know you, little boy. You didn't know my sister, and yet here I am, breaking and entering a church—for what? I should be at Sandy's memorial service, and I'm here instead with you." She shook her head. "Look, you can stay, do whatever you like, but I'm leaving."

"At least wait for me to—" I stepped back and indicated the things I'd taken from the chest—"put them back, okay? I'll go with you, and if we're caught I'll take the blame."

"Will you?" she said ironically but then sighed.

So I started to return the ob-

jects, carefully, one at time. I not only felt defeated but stupid and sorry and embarrassed. I placed the wrapped package in first, gently, tucking it into the corner of the chest where I'd found it. That's when she said, "My father. He had a trunk like that one, with a false bottom." She was standing. "Put your hand flat on the bottom of it."

I did.

"Well, young man, unless you have arms like a damn gorilla, that one has a false bottom, too." She was there beside me. "When you reached in just now, I saw it; it's out of proportion." She touched me on the shoulder. "Now get out of my way."

I did.

It took her a while to find the mechanism to release it because, as she'd said, her sister had been better at this than she. But find it she did, not the type of false bottom she first suspected. This one could be reached from the front, by depressing simultaneously the outside and inside of a panel on the top of the chest. In this way the bottom piece—which was like a drawer about ten inches high and two feet wide—could be moved forward. There'd been no need to empty the entire chest to reach the hidden compartment underneath.

We pulled the drawer out together. It was well-maintained,

oiled and greased so it slid out soundlessly, revealing at last what Sister Rosemarie had seen the morning she'd run from the chapel and into the fog.

"It can't be," Mrs. McNeil whispered. "Why would these be here?"

Because these weren't snakes, no; they were beautiful silver cases, six of them, slightly tarnished and engraved with letters or words that looked—Greek? Arabic?

"Hebrew. These are scrolls," Mrs. McNeil told me. Her hand passed over them almost reverently. "But it can't be. It makes no sense."

There was also a manila folder, papers half pulled from it, some half folded and crushed as if someone had pushed them back in hurriedly.

"Scrolls?" I looked at Mrs. McNeil.

"This just can't be," Mrs. McNeil whispered. She was on her knees, papers in her hands, shuffling through them. "I don't understand. Why here? This." She held two papers edged in green. "This is a bid list? And fax numbers, and . . ." She sat back on her feet and read the second paper, then looked at me. I'd never seen such an expression on anyone's face. Shock? Confusion? No, horror. I took the top paper out of her hand, read aloud:

"I assure you the items we have sent you photos of are genuine. How they fell into our hands is unimportant. The current bid of three hundred thousand English pounds is for the sixteenth century Torah from the village of—" Then a Polish name I couldn't pronounce. "Be assured the original owners have long forfeited their claim. (We have it on good authority that there are no survivors from this village.) We therefore urge you to improve on this bid before the opportunity is lost. Our agents, once again, will assure anonymity on both sides."

There were more of the same, letters back and forth, photos of items in the drawer, other photos showing other cases, presumably already sold.

"It can't be, can it?" I whispered to Mrs. McNeil. She had stepped back, sat down in the small metal chair, then glanced up at the row of crucifixes. "They weren't *selling* them, were they? Mrs. McNeil? It can't be what it seems because . . . because they can't sell these things. They don't belong to them."

"Then who do they belong to?" came a sharp, hard voice from behind us. It was Sister Agnes-Claire, standing there imperiously. Her eyes shot down at me. "Sister Anne called, told me you had come back. You are a troublesome, meddling little boy."

Mrs. McNeil suddenly rose and with a fistful of papers in her hand demanded, "Is this what frightened my sister? Is it? No, it wasn't fear, my poor Sandra. It was horror. That's what she must have felt when she saw these."

"We were given them to safeguard and keep," someone else said, the Reverend Mother, coming in as Sister Agnes-Claire stepped aside. "With the understanding that when the time came, when the war was over, we'd return them to their synagogues and villages. We risked our lives . . ." Her voice was shaky, trembling. Sister Agnes-Claire put out her hand, but Mother Celestine shook her head. "We hid them. We hid their children. And when the elderly rabbi came," she looked down at the drawer open against the floor next to me, "with the Torahs from his synagogue and from others he was protecting, what then could we do? Refuse him?" She extended one pale, quivering hand. She looked at Mrs. McNeil, then at me. "No, we took them, and we hid them with our own valuables. He was taken away and shot that night."

I was on my knees looking up at her, not a very large woman after all. And not Evaline Dawkins, no, and possibly not the woman who had gone to Poland

on the eve of war and became a nun. This was something and someone else, this was what hatched out of eggs mistaken for those of the gentle woodcock.

And she knew it. Suddenly the other sister was there at her side, helping her down into the metal chair. Her gray eyes were set straight ahead.

"They should have been returned," Mrs. McNeil said. "Why didn't you—"

"Returned where?" Sister Agnes-Claire demanded. "There was no village after the war, no temple, no children, nothing! But the money we got—" Her eyes dropped to the scrolls in the drawer. "They built this school and went to our missions, our charities."

"It doesn't matter," I said at last.

Both women turned to me and they knew there was nothing they could do, nothing they could say; there was no going back, no way to undo . . .

"We risked our lives for them." Sister Agnes-Claire made one final, pathetic attempt.

"But surely," Mrs. McNeil appealed, "you could have tried to find the owners? These items are—good God, don't you know what they are, what they represent?"

"Owners?" Agnes-Claire answered back, her voice shrill.

"Don't you understand? They're all gone! There are *no* owners!"

"But you're wrong," I whispered, feeling terribly sick. "Of course there are owners. All over the world." I looked up at both women. "An entire race." I put my hand down on the first scroll in the drawer. "An entire people."

Federal agencies notified. The State Department. Ambassadors, in Europe and the Mideast. World police organizations, long involved in searching for lost items like these.

And two churches, one with accusations, the other with explanations, then apologies and reimbursement, both financial and spiritual. What could have been scandal became the actions of two "misguided individuals" who had "acted alone, putting their own needs ahead of others." Or so one major Boston paper put it.

Another wrote that "thus favor turned to responsibility, responsibility to burden, and finally burden to opportunity. A horrific trap in which redemption will not come easily to those who, though appearing to help, only helped themselves."

But few mentioned the young nun who had found those letters, the bid lists, and the religious objects that were now in the

hands of the State Department until "final disposition can be determined." No, few talked about Sister Rosemarie, who became so sickened, so horror-stricken when all she believed in became desecrated in a hidden drawer that she clutched a cross to her chest and raced out into the fog. Not in shame. Not in disgrace. But in sheer terror. Her death was exactly what it had appeared to be: an accident.

A week later I finally got to see Jake. He'd been involved with the federal authorities now working on the case, but finally his part was done. Our only contact had been a phone call here and there, a lot of "Can't say much about it, Herbie, even to you. But when I can, I will. I promise."

I accepted it because I had to; my part was whittled down to

nothing. My mother insisted, and that's the way it was. I was just the kid who watched a nun go running past him in the fog; that's it.

"So when will it be back to life as usual?" I asked as Jake got out of his car. In the house Mr. Hornton was fixing some steamers. Mom was taking a pie from the oven. This was going to be a kind of a celebration if that were possible.

"Soon, I hope," Jake said, then he asked, "Meggie; how is she? She going to be okay?"

"She's with her mother," I said, then, seeing the concern on his face, said, "She's going to be fine, Jake. Didn't I tell you—Meggie's not afraid of snakes." I tried to smile, couldn't. "And neither am I."

"Yeah," he said, throwing his arm around my shoulders, "I know."

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UNSOLVED

by
Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the May issue.

On Monday morning two FBI agents swept into the sheriff's office flashing their credentials.

"Agent Matt Masters," began the taller man, introducing himself, "and this is my associate, Agent Glenn Goodman. Not much time to lose, sir. We have reliable information that members of the Hobbes Mob will strike here in Bounty County in the middle of this week. The FBI would appreciate your cooperation."

Old Sheriff Stan Starr was not about to be rushed into anything. After shaking hands warily, he asked, "Jest what are you talkin' about? What's this here 'Hobbes Mob' anyhow? And why do you suppose any mob is about to do somethin' in my county?"

"To begin," said Masters, "the Hobbes Mob is an offshoot of the Mafia composed of young punks out to impress the kingpins of the organization. The last names of the six members are Gallago, Houlini, Iannello, Jellilicki, Karbanzo, and Lambroso—"

"And their first names," interjected his partner, "are Alfie, Bart, Carlos, Danny, Emilio, and Frank."

"They include," Masters continued, "an arsonist, a bank robber, a driver of the getaway car, a hit man, a kidnapper, and a lookout. At present they are staying at the Hotchkiss Hotel right here in Bounty City."

"If'n they're known criminals," declared Sheriff Starr, "arrest 'em and stick 'em in jail."

"Afraid it's not quite that simple," explained Goodman. "Our problem is that we have never caught them red-handed. The Mafia's high-priced lawyers get them off on every charge. But *this* time we have an opportunity to nail them dead-to-rights."

Stan Starr leaned back in his swivel chair and stroked his chin. "And how to you propose to do that?"

"According to our reliable information, the Hobbes Mob is planning to pull a three-man operation in this county. It could be a burning, a kidnapping, a killing, or a bank holdup, depending on

which members take part. The lookout and the getaway driver are expected to participate."

Deputy Lester Loesser had been quietly listening. Now he spoke. "Where's this gonna take place?"

"During the previous Monday through Saturday," answered Agent Masters, "my men shadowed the six to four nearby towns—Stantown, Tankville, Unterburg, and Vinapolis. Each mob member visited each of these towns just once during the week, spending the full day there undoubtedly casing possible targets. Our informant tells us that all three mobsters planning to take part in their next caper visited their selected town on the same day to work out the details. So, if we determine which town they plan to hit and who will take part, we can deduce what crime they have in mind and arrange a trap."

"And," added Agent Glenn Goodman, "we can do that by determining which of the six visited the *same* town on the same day."

"Okay, I git that much," drawled the old sheriff. "So what's the answer?"

"We received the latest report just this morning, and Matt and I haven't had time yet to correlate all the information. Perhaps you have some suggestions. We now know that—

(1) "Neither Alfie nor Bart is Mr. Houlini or Mr. Iannello, and none of the four is the getaway driver or the kidnapper. Furthermore, neither Carlos nor Danny is Mr. Gallago or Mr. Karbanzo, and none of the four is the hit man or the arsonist. Emilio is not the bank robber.

(2) "According to our surveillance team, no mob member visited Unterburg on Monday, Vinapolis on Tuesday, Tankville on Thursday, or Stantown on Friday.

(3) "Danny went to Tankville the day after Alfie went to Stantown. Emilio went to Stantown the day after Alfie went to Unterburg. Alfie is neither Mr. Karbanzo nor Mr. Lambroso, and none of the three is the bank robber.

(4) "Frank visited Tankville the day after Carlos visited that town and the day before Bart visited Stantown.

(5) "Only one mob member visited Stantown on Thursday. An-

other member was the only one to visit Tankville on Monday. And a third member was the only one to visit Unterburg on Wednesday.

(6) "Mr. Jellilicki went to Tankville the day before the mob's lookout went to Vinapolis. The getaway driver (who was not the man in Stantown on Thursday) visited Unterburg exactly two days before Emilio visited Vinapolis. Mr. Houlini (who isn't the mobster specializing in arson) went to Tankville the day after Danny went to Unterburg and the day before Mr. Lambroso went to Unterburg. The arsonist's visit to Vinapolis was not on Thursday.

(7) "No mob member who was in Tankville on Tuesday had been in Vinapolis on Monday.

(8) "Frank (who is not the bank robber) visited Unterburg exactly three days after he visited Stantown. Bart visited Unterburg exactly two days after he visited Tankville.

(9) "Neither Mr. Karbanzo nor the hit man was in Stantown on Wednesday. Mr. Lambroso (who is not the driver) did not go to Tankville on Tuesday. Mr. Jellilicki was not in Unterburg on either Tuesday or Thursday.

(10) "The kidnapper went to Vinapolis the day after Mr. Gallago went to Unterburg.

(11) "Mr. Iannello went to Stantown the day after he visited Vinapolis and the day before Mr. Lambroso went to Stantown.

(12) "Furthermore, according to the reports my men turned in, Emilio visited Tankville on the same day that Frank went to Vinapolis."

Deputy Lester Loesser fingered the .45 in his holster and asked eagerly, "So what's next?"

"Well," replied FBI agent Matt Masters, "I plan to fax this information to our headquarters in Washington and have them run it through the computer—"

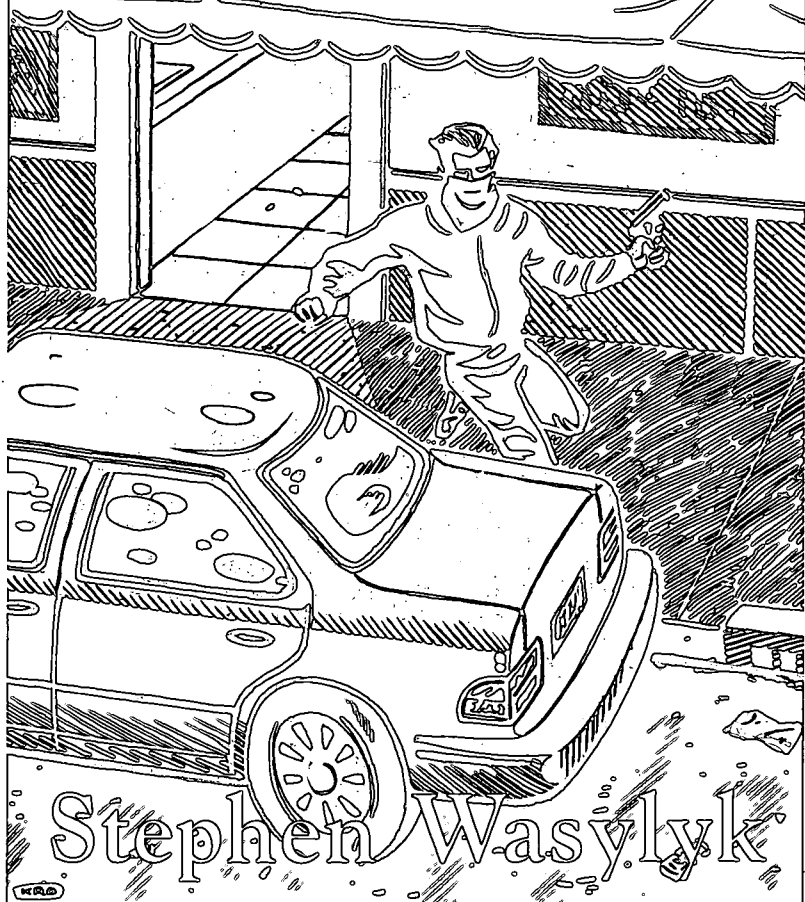
"Tain't necessary," declared old Stan Starr, who had been doodling on the back of his grocery list. "From all the palaver you two FBI guys bin spoutin', I jest figgered the town has to be _____,

and _____, _____, and _____
_____ went thar on _____. Seems purty obvious they plan
to _____. I'll show them ornery young skunks they can't mess
around in *my* county. Let's go!"

*What crime is being planned by members of the Hobbes Mob?
Where?*

See page 153 for the solution to the March puzzle.

Food for the Tiger



Stephen Wasylyk



The last person in the world I'd ever expected a call from was Clive Dell. Mayor Clive Dell.

So when that mellifluous baritone asked, "How've you been, Hobart?" I could only wonder what he wanted—while marveling at how, even over the phone, a politician can convey warmth and sincerity when he really doesn't give a damn.

"Brain-dead but alive, Mr. Mayor."

Dell chuckled.

"With your sense of humor, you should have been a stand-up comic instead of going into the private investigation business. But listen. Forget that Mr. Mayor crap. You and I go back too far for that. In fact, we go back so far I know that if I ask you a question I'll get an honest answer. You always were honest, Hobart."

"Strange, not very likeable, but honest," I said. "Today they call it lacking in social skills. But if you want an honest answer, I'll be happy to give you one. Ask the question."

"It isn't that simple. Since it's the number one topic in the news, I'm sure you know about Hampden Square."

"Only what the media tell me. If you're involved, I hope you go to jail."

Dell chuckled. "So do a great many others. Fortunately, I'm

not. You've read about Sergeant Jeager?"

"Nothing captures the attention more than a cop accused of a coldblooded killing. Why bring his name up? On his best day he couldn't deliver more than two votes for you."

"He claims he's innocent."

"They all do."

"He says he was framed."

"Nothing new there."

"My daughter expects me to help him."

I leaped to a conclusion.

"She and Jeager are what the tabloids call romantically involved?"

"That's how it's been for some time."

"So? Pull a few strings. You're good at that."

"You know I can't appear to take a hand in it."

"So explain that to your daughter."

"Tell me how, Hobart. Tell me how a widower explains to his only child that he can't help the man she loves because it might ruin his political career."

"You wanted an honest answer, I'll give you one. Decide which is more important, your daughter or your career."

"I want to keep both, Hobart."

"Spoken like a true politician. Now give *me* an honest answer. What do you want? You sure as hell didn't call to renew an old acquaintanceship."



"I'm trying to take a hand in the only way I can. Vic Webb is Jeager's attorney. Now, Jeager can't afford you, but I told Webb to call you anyway, that I'd talk to you first. There's more than politics and justice here. If Jeager is found not guilty, I have to be sure the verdict isn't just a jury's opinion. After all, he's my prospective son-in-law. Even if you don't break the case against him, you'll get a good idea of whether he's really guilty, and I'll know what to say to my daughter. This way no money changes hands between us, but I'll owe you a big one."

I could feel that icy calm that always precedes one of my rare explosions. I spoke very carefully.

"Dell, long before you became mayor, I called you because I needed a favor. Nothing big, but important to me at the time. We'd never been what you'd call close friends at the university, so if you'd said no, I'd have understood. But I didn't expect to be treated with contempt."

The humiliating memory made my throat muscles tighten. "Hell, I could feel it coming across the phone wires like a power surge. Contempt, Dell, as in—*what in the hell makes this loser think I have time for him?* Twenty years later you want me to do a favor for you? Get lost."

I replaced the phone very care-

fully, my hand trembling. At least I hadn't yelled. That snub had rankled for years, pushed below the surface as I scored my own little life's victories but always there. He'd always had an expression: "Some people are born to be food for the tiger," which was his way of classifying someone as a loser. I'd had no idea he considered me a big cat's breakfast snack.

Libby poked her head into the office. "Judy on two."

I picked up the phone.

"The mayor called? Going up in the world?"

Time hadn't diminished the warmth I always felt at hearing my wife's voice. Holding her own against time in other ways, too. No gray as yet in the auburn hair, no fine lines in the creamy skin, still slim. Deterioration wouldn't have mattered anyway. She was the only person in the world with whom I'd ever felt comfortable. Great antidote for anger. I took a deep breath.

"Remember Detective-Sergeant Jeager?"

"The man accused of murder? Refresh my memory."

"He came to the office about eight years ago before I decided to make an honest woman of you. He was only a detective then. Very tall, goodlooking guy —"

"Oh yes. With red hair like mine."



"Slightly darker, but then he doesn't have the benefit of henna rinses or whatever to capture the marvelous highlights that are the envy of your friends. The mayor's daughter is in love with him—"

"Wise girl. Since you're already taken, next best is a good-looking redhaired man."

"Claims he's innocent—"

"With red hair, he must be."

"What is this? The Red-Headed League?"

"We redheads stick together."

"That wasn't your reaction when I wanted to replace you with the well-endowed Myrtle Macowski."

"Hers came out of a bottle," she said loftily.

"To get back to reality. Because of politics, His Honor has to steer clear of the mess or awkward questions will be asked, but if your husband and his highly respected P.I. agency served as the defense attorney's investigator, well, that would have nothing to do with him, of course. He could, however, whisper in his daughter's ear how he was doing his fatherly best to help the man she loves. And who knows? I might even get Jeager off."

"But you said no."

"I'm too sensitive and compassionate to be so harsh. I told him to get lost."

"Okay, you don't like him. What about his daughter?"

"I don't even know her."

"Well, since she's the one who needs help, it seems to me you're punishing her for her father's sins."

"That isn't nice. Redheaded women must develop a mean streak in their old age."

"Tell me I'm wrong."

I couldn't. What I thought of Clive Dell should have nothing to do with his daughter.

"Take the case," she said. "You may save an innocent man, and we'll get an invitation to the wedding. If you don't clear him, you save the poor girl from marrying a murderer. Unless she's a complete whacko and insists on a wedding in a jail cell, in which event we send a silver hacksaw and regrets. Call the mayor back."

"No need. With his ego he won't accept being turned down. He'll harass me to get me to accept. Frankly I was looking forward to making a list of the ways I could tell him to go to hell. I'll get another call within an hour."

I did. From Webb.

"You talked to the mayor?"

"I turned him down—"

"I told him you would."

"—but my wife thought that would be a mistake. Since she's smarter than I am, I always listen to her. I'll send Greg Bayliss to talk to you."

"Kiss your wife for me. Is Bayliss any good?"



"Two things I've always done, Webb. When I kiss my wife, it's for me, and I don't hire anyone who would make me look bad. I'm very capable of doing that myself."

The way it began, a reporter named Cofer, looking for a Pulitzer or a raise or a job on one of the big three papers in the country, started investigating the eight-month-old robbery and shooting of an Asian store owner named Jin Li.

Li's little grocery was one of six small stores in a very bad neighborhood, so bad that City Council had decided to demolish the area and build a mini-mall called Hampden Square, complete with parking lot, shrubbery, trees, and wide sidewalks. As one cynic put it, might as well give the predators a pleasant working environment.

The police couldn't find a witness, could develop no leads. The only thing they had was the nine mil slug that killed Li. They sat back to wait. Holdup men leave their own mark on the crime, and one successful robbery usually leads to others until the perpetrator makes a mistake. Not this time. There were many other robberies but nothing resembling this one.

In reviewing the case, Cofer discovered that the nine mil slug

had disappeared. He thought that very odd, since only the police had access to the evidence room.

A month later his story broke on page one. By noon every city official even remotely connected with the mini-mall idea was scrambling to get as far away from it as possible. The D.A. didn't worry them. He was a party hack who would push as much under the rug as possible. The U.S. Attorney, however, was of a different political persuasion and likely to give them all the Ballot Box Blues because Federal money was involved. Since Li was an Asiatic, he was also murmuring about hate crime.

The five store owners told Cofer that they hadn't been offered enough to sell out, the attorney they'd retained either couldn't or wouldn't do anything, and although they had been offered stores in the mini-mall, the rents were too high. Impasse. They hinted that Li had been killed to intimidate them into settling with the city.

This suspicion was based on their opinion that the police hadn't worked very hard or very long on the case. They'd told the detectives about a homeless man camped out in a carton across the street who might have been a witness, but as far as they knew, no attempt was made to find him.



Cofer started digging.

He not only found the man, but two weeks later he'd uncovered the usual "let's all make a buck" scam. Someone buys up worthless property and flips it back and forth between paper corporations, the price rising each time. A councilman introduces a bill to redevelop the area. The property is sold to the city at an enormous profit, and everyone who pushed the measure through gets a piece of the action. Works more often than not. This time Cofer had derailed the money train, but between delays and adjustable memories, nothing much would come of the white-collar part of it.

The killing was something else.

"Webb and I went over it a half dozen times," said Bayliss when he returned. He was big and young with closely cut brown hair and a disingenuous round face—the type women, especially elderly ones, instinctively trusted. A great con man's face, which came in handy now and then.

"They didn't find the homeless guy because they didn't look that night. He was gone in the morning because he'd found a job. Cofer turned him up. His name is Bo Morgan. Key witness. He looked up when he heard the shot and saw a tall guy with a basketball player's build run out of the

store and dive into a car at the curb. The dome light—"

I held up a hand.

"Dome light?"

He grinned. "I know. Pros disconnect the interior lights. Anyway, the light was on long enough for him to see the man pull down a handkerchief he used as a mask—"

A little bell chimed somewhere in my mind as though Bayliss had scored a point in an electronic game. "A handkerchief? Wild West style?"

"So Morgan says. Now, he admits he didn't get a good look at the man's face, but he did see something else just as important. Red hair."

"How did they get from red hair to Jeager?"

"Cofer. He remembered seeing a redhaired sergeant named Jeager playing basketball at the police gym. He also remembered that someone named Jeager signed as a witness on one of the transfer documents. He began asking questions. Jeager was on duty that night but had taken an hour for some personal business. He had access to the evidence room, so he could have taken the nine mil slug. Cofer talked to the D.A., and the D.A. took it from there."

"You read Webb's copy of Jeager's interview?"

Bayliss nodded. "I know what you're going to ask. He sign the

transfer document? Yes. Did he read it? No. Why? Because the man who asked him to sign is a cousin he grew up with, so he trusted him. I thought a good cop didn't even trust his own mother. The cousin, of course, is one of the people under scrutiny by the U.S. Attorney."

"The D.A.'s premise is that he was in on the redevelopment scam with his cousin and he killed Li to get the stalled proceedings moving?"

"That's the motive he's working on."

"Jeager won't say where he was during that hour?"

"He won't even tell Webb. How do we save a guy who won't save himself?"

"We ignore him. One, he's being noble and protecting someone. Two, he believes that what will happen to him if he talks is worse than standing trial. Or even going to jail. Three, he's been promised that he'll be taken care of. Which scenario is Jeager most likely to be following?"

"He's being noble."

"Right. Eight months is a long time, but see if you can find out where the mayor's daughter was during that hour, although I'm damned if I know why he'd want to keep his mouth shut if he was with her."

Bayliss muttered, "Of course all three reasons might apply here."

I pointed at the door. "Never question your elders."

Something was wrong. If Jeager had been with the mayor's daughter, all he had to do was whisper it to the D.A., and the charges would never have been brought. Just the thought of having to call her as a witness and incurring the wrath of Dell would make that political hack quiver.

I doodled ragged and irregular steps on the pad before me. A preschooler could have drawn them better. Cofer had started at the bottom with nothing. Then came the missing bullet, the disgruntled store owners, Bo Morgan, a redhaired perpetrator, a redhaired, basketball-playing cop, and the uncovering of the scam.

All very neat. Cofer'd mounted those steps without a pause, simply placing one foot before the other. No stumbles, no hesitation. Sorry, but it just didn't work that way. I'd broken a few toes and fallen on my face or my keister enough to know. This thing was running as deep and swift as a stream in a mountain gorge. Dip your toes in without being careful, and a second later you're splashing for your life while being swept downstream.

And there was that call from Dell.

As Bayliss said, a good cop doesn't even trust his mother.



When you're running security for a couple of public agencies and a few corporate clients, along with three or four operatives doing work for law firms and whoever walks in off the street, you don't leave your desk without a compelling reason.

I had one. I didn't mention it to Judy, naturally, but reluctant as I was to get involved, it had occurred to me that in untangling the mess, I might find a way to get even with my old friend, Clive Dell.

I found Cofer tapping away at the computer terminal in his cubbyhole in the newsroom. He was a small man with a thin face, a straight nose, beady eyes, straight dark hair, and a full mustache. He looked up, recognition dawned, and he grinned. "The Great Hobart. A legend in his own time. Not here to extend personal congratulations on my story, I'm sure."

"No, but you deserve them. I always enjoy the work of a man who's good at what he does. Have a few minutes?"

"After that? Sure. Sit down. Coffee?"

"Thank you, no." I waved at his terminal. "You can put this in your next story. It's an exclusive. We've been retained by Webb to see if we can help Jeager."

"I appreciate the tip."

"No offense in what I'm going

to say. You did the work and deserve the credit, but I couldn't help feeling you had a little guidance along the way."

He stared at me for a moment before slowly letting his breath out.

"When you were first pointed out to me, Hobart, I thought that a man who looked like an undernourished college professor in heavy, black-rimmed 1970 style glasses and didn't appear smart enough to earn tenure couldn't have broken the cases that you had. You just made me a believer." He held up two fingers. "Two people knew. Me. And the city editor because I told him. No one else even suspected. Then you walk in. Either you're the culprit or you're psychic."

"Neither. What happened?"

"A mysterious e-mail message—if you want a good story, look into the shooting of Jin Li. When those store owners told me about a possible witness, I figured they couldn't all be wrong. I must've walked twenty miles looking for him.

"Because he had rejoined the working class the next day, he could pay for a room. After I talked to him, I thought there might be something to the rest of their story. The more I dug, the more I found."

"Was that the only message?"

"Hey, I've said enough. I'll be a witness, you know."



"So an electronic Deep Throat led you by the hand."

His shoulders lifted. "Does it matter? The facts are there."

"For the scam, yes, because they're on paper. For the shooting, no. Thanks for your time."

In the elevator I wondered why the D.A. had been so quick to make a case against Jeager. All he had was a redhaired man who carried a nine mil auto, had a tenuous tie to the scam of the decade, wouldn't account for his whereabouts during the crime, and had been shakily identified.

If Jeager came up with an alibi or a hole was knocked in the identification, the case was gone.

Jeager was framed? Maybe. It could also be a combination of bizarre circumstances the political powers had told the D.A. to jump on to divert attention from their white-collar shenanigans. Three days of headlines about a rogue cop and who'd notice the rest? If the mayor was embarrassed, who cared? He had his enemies. And if Jeager was convicted, so what?

Bayliss was waiting at the office. "The mayor's daughter can't be found."

"I'm not surprised. Her romance with Jeager could hardly be a secret, so he's tucked her away from the media. Don't worry about it. If we need her, he'll

have to produce her. Any help from her friends?"

"If they remember anything, they're not saying." He shrugged slightly. "We don't seem to be getting anywhere."

"My son, the wisdom of the ancient ones tells us that even the longest journey requires but one step at a time."

"What does the wisdom of the ancient ones tell us when those steps leave us stranded in the boondocks?"

"Hope that Madame Zamboni and her crystal ball come along."

"The other weak spot in the case is the I.D. by Morgan. The shooting was eight months ago. Let's see how good his memory really is."

He was running a machine, stamping some sort of widgets from a strip of sheet metal and tossing them in a carton. Since he was working piecework, his employer suggested we slip him a few dollars to pay for his lost time. Seemed fair to me.

He was younger than I had expected, a black-haired, well-built guy in his late twenties, his face showing a bit more wear and tear than it should have.

We moved away from the clatter of the machines banging out those widgets, and I handed him a twenty.

"To pay for your time."



He grinned. "That's almost three hours' worth."

"Call it a tax-free bonus."

He'd been homeless, he said, because he'd lost his job. He had come home from looking for a new one to find his wife had departed for parts unknown with all their money and furniture, leaving him with the key and an empty apartment with the rent due.

He'd been sacking out in the carton for only a few days when the killing took place. He'd heard the shot and twisted around to see a tall, spare man leave the store, run around the rear of the car, and get in. Since he was down at ground level, the man didn't see him; otherwise his curiosity might have garnered him a bullet in the head.

He didn't know the make of the car. Other than dark, he couldn't identify the color.

The man was a silhouette because the store lights were behind him until he slid under the dome light and pulled the bandana or handkerchief or whatever from his face. He saw a profile that could have been Jeager's. He also saw red hair.

The profile could have been someone else's, but the D.A. would point out that the other facts would fit only Jeager and not some unknown perpetrator.

Be a helluva witness to shake. Articulate, on neither drugs nor

booze, embellished nothing. A straight-from-the-shoulder guy who told what he saw and didn't give a damn whether you believed him or not.

He couldn't be mistaken about the red hair?

He wasn't colorblind, he said. Red was red. That was when the bell chimed again.

As we walked out to the street, Bayliss said, "How long do we wait for Madame Zamboni and her crystal ball?"

"We don't need her yet. We're still marching right along, one foot before the other. Take your size elevens over to Webb's office. Jeager probably drove his own car when he took that hour off. Since it was only eight months ago, he probably still has the same one. Get the keys. We are going to try a little experiment."

"I suppose you're not ready to tell me what it is."

"You suppose correctly. Tell Webb we'll need him tonight, get the car, and meet me back at the office."

The stores had been demolished, but the vacant industrial buildings across the street were still there. So was the alley where Morgan had his cardboard condo.

I'd asked the police district for a patrol car to back us up because the location was now in

the center of a deserted three block stretch with rubble on one side of the street and the vacant buildings on the other. Even though Bayliss and I would be carrying, two guns were no guarantee that in such a modern urban setting we all couldn't disappear without a trace.

So could the patrol car, the sergeant told me, agreeing only after I told him we were trying to help Jeager. Like redheads, cops stick together.

We gathered there at nine when it was fully dark. The streetlights that hadn't yet been shot out were widely spaced. A visitor from another planet would sense this was not a good place to be after sunset. A big city earthling would know it was hardly a good place to be at high noon.

I pulled my car up on the sidewalk, headlights illuminating the rubble to simulate the lights from the demolished stores. We parked Jeager's car where the killer's would have been.

The uniformed officer leaned with folded arms against the trunk of his car, wondering what these nuts were up to.

"You might as well get in on the act," I told him. "We need a disinterested observer."

The four of us crouched in the alley.

At my signal Judy left the sidewalk, came around the rear

of the car, slid inside, and closed the door.

"Okay," I said, "what did any of you see?"

"As much as Morgan must have," said Webb. "I can't find a flaw in what he said."

"Neither can I," said Bayliss.

The cop grunted.

"The dome light is above her right shoulder," I said. "It's on for no more than ten seconds, so all you get is a fleeting impression. Now, can any of you swear, at this distance and under that light, that Judy has red hair?"

"Well, no, but Morgan is positive," said Webb. "I would never shake him on cross-examination."

"Stay here." I walked to the car. "Okay, Judy," I said. "Act Two."

She squirmed in the seat. "Ready." I opened the door for a few seconds and waved them to join me.

Webb practically ran across the street. "Hey, no question about it. I saw red hair."

"So did I," said Bayliss.

The cop grunted.

"What you saw was hair a great deal redder than hers. And Jeager's."

I opened the door again. Judy was wearing a closely cropped wig so bright it was almost orange.

"For Morgan to be so certain, he had to see something with



the color intensified, like the theatrical wig Judy is wearing."

Webb grinned. "Man, can I put on a show for the jury with *that*."

"You won't get the opportunity. When you explain the other half to the D.A., I think he'll drop the charges."

"What's the other half?"

"The mask. Wearing a bandana around your neck was usual in the Old West, so it was easy for an outlaw to lift it up over his nose to make a mask. The current fashion is a ski mask or stocking. Zip, it's on. Zip, it's off. Tie a mask? Half these guys wear sneakers with velcro straps because they never learned to tie their shoelaces. Don't ask me why this one decided to wear a wig, but once he did, he obviously couldn't pull anything over his head. That's the reason for the handkerchief. Maybe he *was* hired to shoot Jin Li and wanted to confuse everyone, which he did, but whoever he was, he wasn't Jeager."

"Unless Jeager wore a wig," said Bayliss.

"Nah," said the cop. "The guy would never pick a wig the color of his own hair. Be like a blonde wearing a blonde wig. Right, Mrs. Hobart?"

"Right." Judy gestured at a half dozen shadowy and menacing figures who had materialized out of the night. "Let's get out of here before we get mugged."

"I'm with you," said the cop.

Before we left, Bayliss leaned down to my window.

"Where did you get the wig idea?"

"Morgan said red was red. Not true. The quality of the light changes all colors. I remembered that under certain conditions Judy's hair, which is as red as decency allows, appears brown. So I wondered if Morgan had seen a wig. If he had, it also explained using the handkerchief as a mask."

As we drove home, Judy said, "I'm convinced Jeager didn't do it, but is it enough for the D.A.?"

"He's spineless, not stupid. Morgan's identification now has reasonable doubt written all over it, the missing bullet could establish innocence as well as guilt, many others could have taken it, and the prosecution can't convince the jury Jeager was at the scene of the crime. He won't take a losing case to trial."

I drove in silence. Instead of feeling smug, I was thinking of unanswered questions. Why did the guy select a *red* wig in the first place? Was Jeager being set up as far back as eight months ago? And who said the killer wasn't aware that Morgan was there to note the color of that wig? Then you had Cofer's unknown e-mail Deep Throat.

It could all be coincidence, but the world's Machiavellis try to



make everything look like coincidence.

TV news at noon the next day informed the city that the D.A. had dropped the charges against Jeager. Insufficient evidence. To the general populace, Jeager was in limbo as far as guilt or innocence was concerned, but His Honor would know the true story.

Not that he had the courtesy to call and thank me. Nor did Jeager or the mayor's daughter. In our rush toward a new and greater society we've discarded simple civility.

At the end of the day I reviewed the names of those under investigation by the U.S. Attorney and wasn't surprised to see most came under the tent of Dell's enemies.

Hmmm.

Jeager's arrest was embarrassing to *Dell*. Exposing the scam was embarrassing to *them*. Looked as though those e-mail messages were a game two could play.

I called Cofer. The thought had never occurred to him, he said, but it was possible there had been more than one sender. An e-mail message can be as anonymous as an unsigned letter.

I hung up, no doubt leaving him staring into space and wondering, something I was now beyond.

A reason for that bizarre wig

and mask disguise still escaped me. If it had been done to implicate Jeager, the wearer must have known where he was during that hour off and, more important, that he would say nothing about it. But why delay eight months before sending the e-mail message to Cofer? Why not put Jeager on the hook immediately?

Why does anyone conceal damaging evidence? Blackmail, for one. Had Jeager paid for eight months and then refused?

Wasn't very likely if you considered that the killing might be tied in with the scam. Could it have been used as leverage? Otherwise known as the ace-in-the-hole technique?

Dell said he wasn't involved in the scam, which meant he'd known nothing about the murder of Jin Li. The man had no morals or scruples, but I didn't think he'd yet descended into murdering people who stood in his way.

But once those amoral, evil people—yes, Virginia, there are evil people in the world—decided that one of the owners had to be killed to motivate the others, they needed pressure to keep Dell in line if he suddenly developed an attack of conscience.

Something along the lines of: *Cooperate or we've fixed it so your daughter's lover stands trial for murder.*



Dell might have refused to be intimidated, so they'd sent that e-mail message to Cofer. And Dell had retaliated by guiding Cofer through the intricacies of the scam. Political poker. And then, knowing his prospective son-in-law was innocent, Dell had dealt me into the game to prove it, using that story of helping his daughter.

No doubt he'd expected me to stop there, but he should have known better. The pot was still on the table because there was one card left to be played.

Where Jeager had been during that hour.

Whatever that card was, I doubted Dell's enemies would turn it face up now. Saving it for a time when it could do the most damage—like during the next election when Dell intended to run for governor? Must be one helluva secret.

A commotion outside took me to the window. Three floors down, the street was jammed with marching people bearing placards. I didn't have to read them.

The first floor of the building opposite was occupied by a family planning clinic where abortions were performed. Pro-life people demonstrated in front of it periodically.

They could have used a little public relations advice today. Blocking the street during the

homeward rush wouldn't win sympathy for their cause, but maybe they were hoping to make the six o'clock news.

No one got elected in this town—or state, for that matter—without the pro-life vote. The polls showed Dell had picked up three-fourths of theirs, so it dawned on me that I wasn't looking at a hundred or so people blocking a street, I was looking at Dell's political future. If he lost that vote, he'd have to find honest work.

An errant thought flashed through my mind: *If Jeager had taken Dell's daughter to have an abortion, he wouldn't—he couldn't—say where he'd been.*

I smiled. Reminded me of the parlor game where the idea was to come up with wild answers to everyday questions, the more outrageous, the better.

But my smile faded. Not so outrageous when examined. Those things did happen, and it could account for Jeager's silence and be that hole card his enemies were holding.

And what a hole card. Dell's political survival demanded it be kept hidden. *The daughter of the pro-life mayor?* Because he didn't have the decency and courage to do anything else, Dell would do whatever they told him in order to avoid losing that pro-life vote. The possibilities made a Hampden Square seem penny-

ante, particularly if Dell became governor.

I wondered whether the best solution was to send one of those anonymous e-mail messages to Cofer. He'd be happy to look into it. If true, he'd have another big headline while I'd have my retaliation for that long-ago snub.

I relished the thought until I realized I'd incur Judy's wrath if I sacrificed his daughter's privacy to bring Dell down.

If she'd really had an abortion, no matter what the reason, it was her business and shouldn't be grist for the news mill because her father was mayor.

Still, the feeling that I was right solidified as I watched the crowd below clearing the street, lining up in orderly rows on the sidewalk. Dammit, Dell was using them. He'd betray them as he would anyone else without a second thought if he found it expedient.

I come from a long line of people who had never been smart enough or devious enough or clever enough to amass much money or achieve fame, but who prided themselves on being honest, which wasn't a bad heritage at all.

There was only one honest way to do this.

The woman in charge of the clinic understandably refused to admit anything.

Sometimes you bet on nothing more than a hunch. If you lose, you walk away broke, but if you win, you walk away wealthy. So I gambled by saying I knew one of her employees had already passed on the information.

When her lips clamped and her pale cheeks grew pink, I knew I'd stumbled on the truth.

I explained the political implications.

She gaped.

I explained how Dell's daughter's name, printed and spoken, would headline the news, thereby violating the privacy the clinic was sworn to preserve. What of the clinic's reputation then?

She appeared ill.

On the other hand, if she cooperated with me, I would guarantee it would never be broadcast at all, so that she would not only be protecting Dell's daughter but also herself. Self-preservation being one of the strongest motivators known, no one refuses a deal like that.

I waited until the political effusiveness was over before placing the copy on Dell's desk. He needed only to glance at it before coldly saying, "So?" the false warmth gone.

"I know other people have it and what they intend to do with it. Neutralize them. Give Cofer an interview in which you say



you won't run for governor until you find the man who really killed Jin Li, and clean up the corruption in this city."

Contempt wasn't the word for his expression. If the electorate ever saw it, he'd be drummed out of town.

"You're smart enough to know that you can still run four years from now and that a great many things can change in four years. Something that can cost you the nomination and election now may not be important then, and you'll have four years for damage control. Otherwise, I turn it over to Cofer, and you can say goodbye to your career."

I walked to the door. "I'll be looking for that interview in the paper tomorrow."

The hate was in his voice now. "Ever consider that you can end up in a nursing home dribbling

applesauce on your bib while the cheery nurses tell your wife how well you're doing?"

Oh, I'd considered it. Only a fool wouldn't. There always has been and always will be a class of people who preach love, brotherhood, and compassion—until you get in their way. That isn't to say they aren't compassionate when they get rid of your body, but no one has survived to attest to that.

I shook my head. "Grow up, Dell. You asked a favor so you wouldn't lose your daughter. Play games with me and she'll deny you exist."

I walked down City Hall's wide marble steps recalling I'd once told him never to underestimate someone he considered food for the tiger.

The man might refuse to be eaten.

THE AIR OF DAY, THE AIR OF NIGHT

ANN WOODWARD



They put her on a horse, when the road became too steep for even the litter bearers, and she finished the journey balanced tall on the shifting, moving back, concentrating on the indigo coat of the man who led by the reins, afraid to look into the tops of trees that clustered below them on the right, afraid of the slips and grindings of hooves as they climbed the mountain, tipped alarmingly back and forth as the gleaming haunches of her mount flexed high or dropped over a bent leg. She held on. She gripped her saddle or sometimes the horse's mane, gripping as tightly the spirit of courage with which she had begun.

And then it started to rain.

"Steady now, steady," the Great Minister said, looking back. She could not reassure him with a brave smile. If the path had been wider, she would have dropped down from that dangerous height to walk in the water-pocked dust.

"Look," he said, "there among the boulders just under the peak. There it is."

The raincloud had descended and dragged its shredded mists across the trees, among the horses, over the standing slabs of black stone. Now the path, the steep fall of the mountain, were completely obscured. Carefully, so as not to change her balance in the least degree, so as not to give any unintended signal to the horse, Lady Aoi raised her head. The golden finial of a pagoda showed just above the mist. And suddenly the stones closed in on both sides, leading them through a cleft of safe, safe walls, under the red gate of the entrance, and into the grounds of Nachi Shrine. She lifted her face to the rain, letting it mix with and disguise her tears.

Now all was bustle as the minister's man dismounted. Aoi's maid O-hana slid from her saddle and slumped over her knees, openly clutching the stones at the side of the road. Blue-robed figures of servants ran from the visitors' pavilion and made themselves busy with the knotted ropes on the packhorses. White-robed priests came from their hall in groups, stood watching them, then returned to their work or their study. Sick with relief, Aoi sat peacefully, not minding that wet fell on her shoulders or that her horse had put his head down to graze and jerked the reins free of the man's hand. This amazing animal had brought her safely over that perilous road, he would not bolt now. Around her was almost level ground, in front only the protective bulk of the mountain, above everything the long ribbon of Nachi Falls. Because of its roar, and because of the shuddering of her diaphragm, she could not speak when the minister rode beside her.

He looked at her closely, nodded, and went on to the dismounting blocks. Aoi's man led her horse after him and they had arrived.

There were times when the Great Minister of the Right said to Aoi, "Come with me." Normally he was occupied with managing the government, placating the ego of the Great Minister of the Left, who actually outranked him slightly but was incompetent and vain, dealing with foreign envoys, requests for tax favors, belligerent priests, and the many problems of having to appeal for military help from the warrior families of the provinces. Normally Aoi served his daughter, a princess, as lady-in-waiting. She did not see him often, but the current of sympathy between them never slackened.

"I must go into the mountains of the Kii Peninsula, not to Koyasan but to one of the three shrines in the south."

"Is it for business?" Aoi asked. An official trip would mean numerous accompanying officials, and she would see little of him. He would be criticized for associating with a woman known to be inappropriately educated, able to read Chinese and knowledgeable about herbs and medicines. Such unfeminine skills made all but the surest-minded men treat her with either scorn or distrust.

"Oh, there may be a small, a very small, and incidental investigation. But I go really for my own pleasure. I flee, I turn my back on the squabbles of council, the unfaithfulness of my allies. I go for the air of day, the air of night that will give me back my faith in human beings, most of all in myself."

"If you invite me with phrases from Mencius, how can I refuse?" she said.

The princess, when Aoi asked for permission to leave for a few days, regarded her with swollen eyes and tight mouth. She knew the affection that bound her father and her senior lady and envied them the serenity of it. Her husband the prince had lately discovered a beautiful young girl at the far eastern edge of the city and was in a fever to overcome her family's defenses and get to her. His behavior had caused his mother to send for him and had upset all his wives in their various houses and their families. The princess feared that he would so disgrace himself that he would be sent away for a period of banishment. With all her efforts to appear unaffected, she was not able to control her bitterness, which showed in the mottled colors of her determinedly smooth face.

"How can you go at a time like this?" she asked Aoi.

They both knew that diversion and comfort alike were unwelcome. Aoi could only look aside, waiting.

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"You will be *glad* to get away," the princess said, and then, "I am unfair. Please go and come back."

They had begun in a modest carriage with a few mounted men as guards, then changed to litters, and finally, at the last post station, put every box and wicker hamper and every person on horses, sending back most of their escort. It was only the beginning of the Ninth Month, but already there had been frost this high up and the leaves of maples were dropping. Pine and cedar shone rich green, their needles softening the mountain roads. Until they reached the nearly impossible last twisting shelves of the way, Aoi had been hardy and energized by adventure, fresh air, abundant lunches, and silence in the night. She slept in the minister's arms, against his broad chest. In the day she had the pleasure of seeing his calm, his dignity, the heft of his shoulders under glossy brown silk, the round shape of his head with its bound-up topknot and firmly tied hat. They shared the quiet pleasure of knowing the other was there.

The head priest was away, they were told, and the minister was not unhappy to be spared the formality of dealing with him. He would present his offering of gold dust tomorrow. O-hana served them supper of beans, tofu, and steamed spinach dressed with sesame seeds, which they ate together; then they separated. The minister would sleep in the men's quarters, Aoi in the women's. There were no other visitors, so they would have complete privacy. Mountain air refreshed her simple room, and Aoi, after the last terrors of the road, after several days of unusual physical activity, was asleep in an instant. O-hana, who slept across the door whenever she accompanied Aoi away from home, was troubled with dreams of crumbling footholds and wildly scrambling horses.

In the night a storm pelted the roof and rattled the rain doors. Aoi heard the shouts and knockings of another party arriving, then slept again. O-hana brought breakfast, red-eyed and sleepy. The minister, Aoi thought, would have risen early, and he would be in the highest place he could find, breathing lightly and letting his eyes run to great distances.

"Who has come?" Aoi said to O-hana.

"Some governor, I think. I didn't ask. His people had many loud questions and behaved like louts. I won't talk to them, they'll have to get their answers from the kitchen help."

"I wonder if the minister has told them who he is," said Aoi. "He often neglects that, for privacy." She thought no more about the traveling governor.

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The minister had climbed to the lip of the falls. The way was easy to find, a clear path up rocky steps. The higher he went, the more his spirit lightened. Ah, he said to himself as he took the last step, now I can breathe, and then laughed because his efforts had actually made breathing almost impossible.

Sitting still as a carved Buddha, calming his pulse, he let his mind fill with the scene around him. What had seemed from below a mountain peak was in fact the southern rim of a long valley. The water of the river flowed shallow in its shelving bed until it feathered into the air and fell, a long white stream shattering onto huge boulders, running then into a pool and, deep and scouring hard, down the mountain. There was little soil here at the top, he sat on cold rough stone. Behind him trees grew thick. His eye just caught a flick of color in the woods, and though he would not let himself look, he knew that a man stood there watching. Following the sliding dips of a hawk, he tried to hold onto peace, but it crisped and frittered away. What man could not meet him openly in this place?

Aoi's peace came with the slow dance of her brush against rough paper. She sat alone in her bare, chill room, a stack of mulberry paper on the floor beside her, dripping water on her inkstone, grinding the stick of pressed lampblack, turning the hare's fur bristles to a fine point before writing old poems and sometimes new ones.

*Daughter will not hear  
When I say, "Look carefully  
Before you take him."  
Daughter runs to place herself  
Where he may look carefully.*

*Two by two nature  
Pairs the needles of the pine.  
Two by two the doves  
Call before we come awake:  
Nature rules that two sleep here.*

"Excuse me, lady." She looked up, drawing the edge of a sleeve across her face. A servingman she had never seen before was sliding open the door from the hall. O-hana should have intercepted any outside person but Aoi had sent her to rest. The man edged standing

into the room, not kneeling in respect, and another followed. Aoi, alarmed, threw the inkstone as they approached without speaking and saw ragged drops of black splatter in an arc across the floorboards. It was a simple thing in spite of her resistance for two strong men to pick her up, cover her mouth and eyes, bind her limbs, and take her away through the garden.

The minister, sighing for his lost vacancy of mind, called in a loud voice without turning around. "Come out!"

There was no movement behind him. Grunting, annoyed, he heaved himself up and strode across the narrow bare space of rock. The man in the trees stepped out to meet him. "You!" the minister said.

The man's smile was not welcoming but grim.

"I had thought never to meet you again," he said, "and now here we are, alone on this—" he spread his arms toward the edge of the mountain and the torrent of water that plunged in a stream taller than the pagoda, to boil and steam on the rocks below "—on this lonely height."

"It was you who came last night during the storm?"

"And it was I who rose as early as you and saw you go out this morning."

"But they said it was a governor and you are not . . ."

"My men tell lies so as not to tell the truth. You imply that I could not rise even to such low office. But you are surely not unaware that it is I who actually govern this province, as deputy for the son of a Great Councillor whose appointment it is and who stays in the capital. Receiving his income quite regularly, he never interferes with me."

"The men with you are armed and rough, they say."

"They serve me, yes. You know how it is, always fights over estate boundaries, illegal absorption of new fields, raids on the government storehouses. I come, I go, I have my men, and my word is law. Here, however, I have not told them who I am, and they never ask. I understand that you too travel incognito. You and the lady who used to acknowledge kinship with me."

"She is your distant cousin only. Had you expected contact with her? You disappeared."

"I went north for a while. And when I came back, I had certain skills of arms and made myself useful here."

They stood angled shoulder to shoulder like old friends, which once

they had been. The deputy governor was as solid and bulky as the minister, both were dressed in the sturdy dark reps of hunting clothes, two figures completely in harmony with the landscape. Anyone seeing them would not have guessed the tenor of their conversation.

The man took in a deep, savoring breath of air. "You saved my life, that time. I have never forgiven you."

"Someone jostled your arm as you drew the bow," said the minister. "I only stepped in to help you. Was that such a bad thing?"

"To be saved by someone younger, newer to the guards, in full view of the others? For the best shot in the division to miss his nocking and feel the arrow of another whiff past his face?"

"The man attacking you had a long sword he had stolen somewhere. Another step and he would have been on you. You were too close to shoot."

The other man pulled his face into a sour grimace. "You don't know what it is to live for years with your mind invaded by your enemy, every thought a justification, every plan a means of revenge."

"No," said the minister, "I don't know that. And a good thing, too. I have many enemies."

"Don't lie."

"Have you found that you can govern without making men angry?"

"Fuh. Nothing they do can touch me. They are not personal friends as you were."

The minister only regarded him. "Has it always been such a danger for anyone to love you? Has your wife suffered for it, your children?"

"They don't know."

"You mean they don't know that once you needed a friend to shoot a rampaging robber for you? Surely, if they love you, they could bear to know that."

"Ah!" The exclamation burst out of him, full of the rancor and secret animosity of years.

"I see," said the minister, understanding now that there was danger in this situation. "I didn't know. I have missed you. How foolish of me. I have missed my friend, and he is not my friend."

"By your own fault."

"Tell me," said the minister, unmoved, his eye steady. "Is it you who has opened a secret mine here?"

"You can't know that!" A brief, baffled confusion crossed his face.

"I know most of the things I need to know."

“Ah-h-h, how it will please me to be rid of you! I have trained all my life, keeping the military discipline. You can’t prevent me.” He squared himself, arms flexing. “It’s a long way down to the rocks at the bottom. They will say you fell. You should never have climbed up here, it isn’t safe.”

“Lady Aoi knows the whole story. You will not deceive her.”

“But we have taken her.”

The minister turned all the force of his character, his only weapon, on this man who had never been a coward. “Taken her?”

“She is underground by now.” The man seemed to swell, stoking his unforgiving spirit. He raised his arms, tensed his fingers to wrestle the minister to the edge and throw him over. But the steady gaze of complete knowledge was too much for him. Gasping, finally weeping with rage, his mouth open in desperation, eyes streaming water under scowling brows, he moved, racing the few steps to the edge, past the still form he had held in memory for so long, flinging himself with a great thrust from the bald stone, turning in the air at the last instant to throw out an arm in panic and appeal, caught by the torrent and smashed head over heels and down.

The minister did not stay to look over the cliff. Fear for Aoi sharp in his chest, he slid and fell, jarring down the rough steps, losing his hat, tearing his robes, scraping the skin from elbows and ankles. Underground. Underground. Had they murdered her, buried her? He could not think it, that must be his last conclusion.

Aoi lay with feet tied together and arms bound along her sides. Her head ached, her hip was bruised, a sharp edge of stone had cut her arm when she was thrown down. A dirty sash had been so strongly wrapped around her lower face that her jaw had locked sideways and the pain of that was the most severe of all. The blindfold had been reclaimed after she was dropped, but she could not tell if her eyes were open or shut, they registered only the most complete blackness. The rocky floor where she lay was cold but dry, the air even colder. There was an ancient smell, as of roots and earthy salts. Desperate to relieve the pain in her lower face, she turned and turned her head. The sash slipped against her hair and loosened just enough so that the joint snapped back into place with cramps and shocks in the surrounding muscles. She tried crying out and felt the infuriating impotence of nightmare, for there came only a tiny awkward mewling sound in her throat.

The minister had no need to look for O-hana and his two escorts.

Aoi had been missed and the scattered paper and spilled ink in her room pondered. The men had at once alerted the shrine's priests and all the servants, and they had made a search. They found no trace of her.

"This is something evil," said the minister, and he told them of the deputy governor's leap into the falls, which in itself polluted this sacred place. "He thought that it would be I who would go tumbling into the water. And since Lady Aoi is the only one here who would recognize him and is familiar with our history, he had her abducted. I don't know how he thought to explain her absence, perhaps some story of double suicide, but he meant to walk away from this entirely unsuspected, no one knowing who he was."

"We saw nothing," said one of the servants. "But those toughs who came with that man were standing around watching the falls. They must have known something would happen."

"Yes, and now that it is he who is drowned, they have all left."

"Ah," said the minister. "Then there is no one we can question. Underground, he said, and my first thought is a mine."

The servants all mumbled and shifted their feet.

"Don't tell me you don't know that there is a recent mine here. Some of you surely have relations who are doing the work."

There was silence. The priests exclaimed in surprise. Among the servants, heads hung and eyes looked sideways at the forceful man none of them knew. Suddenly O-hana spoke. "He is a great minister from the capital. He sees the emperor whenever he pleases."

Emperor was a magic word to these men, and they looked up in awe. Then two brothers consulted with each other. "There is an old mine, no good now, with the copper all gone," and they sent for torches and led the group at a trot toward the mountain.

There was indeed a mine leading back and back into solid rock that was dark with age and had no recent toolmarks. They explored, they listened. The air was sweet and cold. In a large cave bats hung from the ceiling and, disturbed by the light, caused panic when they flew overhead.

"You are sure we have covered it all?" said the minister.

"Our family have worked here for years," said the brothers. "We know this mine."

"Then we must look elsewhere. Are there caves?"

"No," they said.

"Cellars?"

"No."



The minister sat down on the ground. His clothes were torn, his arms were bloody, his cap had slipped down over one eye. O-hana, who had come with them, knelt just behind him, ready if he should need her. "Are there grave mounds?" she said.

"Not here. Death is a pollution here."

"Wells? Icehouses? Think!" said the minister.

"Underground means buried," said a young boy, concerned because the others did not seem to understand this. His grandfather knocked his head.

"It must be the mine," said the minister. "I have heard rumors, which is one reason I am here. Give me that torch."

Inside again, he examined the walls of the main shaft and all the side tunnels. In one they found a rockslide at the end. Holding the torch near, he saw the bright tissues of flame lengthen in a current of air. It took two hours of digging before the brothers were through. What they entered was a high chamber of rock, the floor littered with fallen stones of all sizes. Aoi was not there.

The crowd of servants and priests were stooping one by one through the narrow opening and gathering in a confused mass, stumbling on the uneven footing, exclaiming at the height revealed to them, and whispering that they had known she would not be in a place so hard to reach.

The child who had spoken before said in a high voice, "I can get through there!"

"Hush," said his grandfather.

The minister, still holding a torch, found that he must keep it high or be burned. The flame streamed back in a strong movement of air. "Why is there such a breeze in here?" he said. "There must be—"

"I can get through there! Look," said the child, "let me go through that hole."

Near the hole the flame snapped and fluttered even more strongly. They lifted him up and helped him crawl into a narrow space between two folds of rock. So it was that a child untied the sash around Aoi's face, stroked her cheek, and said as a man would have, "It's all right, it's me, I'm here."

The entrance to this shaft of the mine, when the boy had followed it, was high on the mountain and on the other side of the bluff from the old entrance. He told them to go out and led them into the new digging. "Gold!" they said when they saw the veins. Some gawped, some kicked the ground and looked fearfully at the minister. They had known of this new tunnel, they had been looking for it to steal

the ore, but they had not been able to find it. They couldn't believe that the deputy governor's men had dug here and they hadn't known.

Against the far wall, looking rather like a bundle of bedding, was Aoi, a tangle of slight bones, smudged brocade, and long, long hair spread unbound over the rocky floor. The priests turned modestly away, the servants had never seen such a beautiful woman. Scolding them for looking at a lady so openly when she was unable to prevent it, O-hana flew to her with a little cry.

The light pierced Aoi's eyes like needles, creating dazzling and painful blooms of ragged color, giving her a new blindness. They carried her to him, and he folded her against his chest, to warm her, to feel that she was really there and whole, to never let her go.

Two days later they left Nachi Shrine. The deputy governor's body had washed far downstream and was dealt with by provincial officials. Because it did not come to rest at the shrine site, the priest at the main shrine of Hongu decided that the death had not occurred there. Nevertheless, he would come soon and perform special purification rites. The new mine was declared property of the emperor and would be guarded day and night, though the minister knew that, after an initial period of awe over the serious responsibility of protecting a possession of the emperor, nothing would prevent the guards from taking extra pay in raw ore. An official mining crew would be sent as soon as possible.

"You must stay with me," he said to Aoi when they rested at the first stop on the way back. The men were setting up cloth shelters, spreading pallets on the ground, and cooking over a small fire. Aoi was still nervous of enclosed spaces. They would sleep under the stars.

"I will always be with you. But you don't need a wife. You have your work, and I must do what I can to console your daughter and soften her toward herself."

They had had this discussion many times.

"I think to give it all up," he said.

"I know."

"But it is not the time."

"I agree."

"What will we do?" he said with sudden energy, turning to her. "Wait until we are old? Throw away so much time we could have together?"

"Or throw away so much good we could do elsewhere, or—" she

smiled, letting her eyes, which had still the precious ability to see, take in his broad face, so dear to her "—or this sweetness when we do come together?" The ache of her bruises, the burning of cut skin were sensations she relished because she was alive to feel them. But she would not distort what was left of her life just for joy of having it. She was so used to the independence of a lady-in-waiting that she felt she could not close herself up in a house, even as wife of this man. "However," she continued "I think that a long period of recovery will be needed. May I ask you for haven?"

His eyes lightened. "You men!" he called. "Go and see to the horses."

"Two by two is nature's rule," murmured Aoi.

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MYSTERY CLASSIC

# Madman's Chain

Gilbert Wright



**B**y dawn Sam Finelace had figured out what he had to do. He eased his lanky body away from Delda, carefully swung his feet to the cabin floor, and stood up without disturbing her. Collecting his clothes and shoes, Sam tiptoed barefooted past Peter's crib and through the blanketed doorway into the kitchen. Nine-year-old Gussie was snoring busily in her alcove as he crossed silently to the door and went out. Sam dressed on the back porch, shivering.

The river was a broad area of ghostly motion in the darkness, and Quartz Rapids, a mile upstream, was no more than a whisper because the canyon breeze had not yet begun its day. Nothing could be clearly seen except to the east, where, fifteen hundred feet above, a segment of the canyon's rim stood sharp against the gray of dawn.

The chickens were still asleep, but while Sam was going through the tool chest in the lean-to, the old rooster gave a halfhearted crow. Probably the only reason he ever crowed at all was to let the hens know he could; the nearest other rooster was sixty miles upstream.

Sam brought the twenty foot chain, the two bolts, and the hammer to the pine tree in the front yard. He took a turn of the chain around the tree, slipped a bolt through the last link and then through a link a foot from the trunk, put on a washer, and screwed the nut home. Bracing the bolt against a rock, Sam struck repeatedly at the threaded end with the hammer until it became a rivet head over the nut. Nothing but a metal-cutting tool could ever unfasten it.

Taking the free end of the chain in his outheld right hand, Sam found he could get about twelve feet from the tree. Keeping the chain taut, he scuffed a line through the pine needles with his heel all the way around the tree to complete the circle. He then went to the birch clump on the river edge, where he cut a stout six foot whip.

Returning to the tree, Sam knelt again by the rock and riveted the free end of the chain around his left ankle. He then threw the hammer beyond the circle, felt through his pockets, and tossed his knife, matchbox, and a few stray nails after the hammer. Next he went over the area of his circle and got rid of every rock and stone that could be dangerous if thrown. There wasn't anything else he could think to do, so he sat down facing the cabin.

The Finelace homestead was in a crescent bend of the river with a sandbar along the shore where the cabin was and about eight acres of box canyon with good black soil and a cold little stream full of wa-

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tercess. There was a big truck garden, some berry bushes and fruit trees, a corn patch, and a sizable wheatfield. There were six pigs and around thirty chickens. But mostly the Finelaces ate the wild meat Sam got with the 410 or the .30-30.

Sam and Delda had begun their married life trying to operate a country store near Twin Falls. But they were both farm-raised, and by the time the store failed, they knew where they really belonged. The only way they could get a farm for themselves was to take up land so isolated that most people wouldn't have considered it. Sam and Delda didn't mind being so far from anybody; besides, they had too much to do to get lonely.

And now their little farm supported them well; they were independent and un beholden.

There was no road, or even a trail, to the Finelaces'. The only way to get to civilization was to walk upstream along the river rocks, and when a cliff came down and cut you off, you had to climb to the main ridge and around to get back on the river again. It was sixty miles to Saddler's ranch, but there the road began and it was only twelve miles of easy walking to Burnt Pine, where there were stores, telephones, and a state highway.

Sam always walked out in October. He would have six or seven ounces of placer gold and a pack of choice skins. This would bring around three hundred dollars, which was enough cash for what store-boughten things the Finelaces needed and to buy the lumber and nails to build a scow to float home in. Once he got home, Sam would take the scow apart, straighten the nails, and maybe build a shed or add to the flume that brought working water to his placer.

The sun was turning the western rim of the canyon orange; when it became bright gold, the light would come in through the cabin window and wake Delda. The sun was the only clock Finelaces had or needed.

In a little while Sam could smell coffee. Then Delda called from the back door.

Sam stood up. "I'm out here!" he called. "You'd best bring Gussie, too!"

Presently Delda and Gussie came around the side of cabin; the Finelaces hardly ever used the front door.

Sam stepped forward and pointed at the scuffed line with the whip. "Don't come closer than that."

Delda's brown eyes were alight, and she was ready to smile because Sam often started the day with some little joke and she thought there was going to be one now. But as she looked at Sam, the half-born smile died, and her color went with it.

"Daddy's chained himself up," observed Gussie in her flat little voice.

Delda's arm went across the girl's back and held her close. "What is it, Sam?"

"Last night when I was putting the potatoes in the root cellar there was a skunk in the bin," said Sam. He held out his right hand. "He bit me. I poked iodine in the tooth holes, and it feels all right."

"You didn't say anything."

"I hadn't figured out what to do then."

"There wasn't any skunk smell."

"Something was wrong with him," said Sam. "After he bit me, he fell out of the bin and ran around on the floor. He would go sideways and fall down, and then pick himself up and start off again until he ran into something. The door was open all the time, but he never seemed to notice it."

With a cry of wild protest Delda was in Sam's arms. He held her tightly.

Gussie, without knowing the reason, began sobbing.

Sam gave Delda a last hug and pushed her away. "Now, get over the line and stay there."

Little Peter came around the cabin, toddling stiff-leggedly in his sleeping suit. He reached Delda and tugged at her skirt.

Without taking her eyes from Sam, Delda spoke to Gussie, "Take Peter in, and feed him his mush."

Gussie started around the side of the cabin with Peter, then changed her mind and went in by the front door. She left it open.

Delda asked unsteadily, "Sam, did it—was its mouth foamy?"

He nodded. "I killed it and saved the head."

"The brains will show the doctors if it was mad, won't they?"

"I've heard so. I do know they examine a dog's head."

"Sam—" her voice stopped, and she couldn't say anything until she had swallowed "—do you know how long—I mean, how soon after—"

He shook his head. "Might happen any time for all I know. I've heard that an animal that gets it is afraid of water." He looked at the river for a moment, then smiled ruefully. "It doesn't bother me yet."



"Oh, Sam—" Delda covered her face with her hands and slumped to her knees, her slim body shuddering with sobs.

"Aw, honey—" He started to her, arms extended, but the chain jerked him to a cruel halt. "Please, Delda—don't give way."

Sam saw Gussie standing in the door, looking at them. "Go back to Peter, Gussie. We'll tell you about it later."

Delda stood up and went over to the porch and sat down facing Sam, her hand holding a roof support.

He made his voice matter-of-fact. "I've thought things out the best I could, Delda. We've had our troubles before—like the time Gussie had the fever—and we've licked them by ourselves. But this time it looks like we have to have outside help."

Delda was no longer crying; the dark eyes in the white face pleaded that Sam would know what to do. Sam usually did.

"Now then," he said easily, "if I started to walk out and it took hold on me before I got to Saddler's—well, I'd likely come to my end in the river or off a cliff." His voice lowered. "But, Delda, I might come back here. A madman don't know what he's doing. I might come back here and do something awful to you and the children. It would be the same thing if we all tried to go out together. If it was to come on me, there wouldn't be anything you could do to protect them and yourself—without you shot me. I don't think I could trust you to do that."

She shook her head quickly.

"You could leave me here with what food I'd need and chained up so's if I did get sick I couldn't come after you, and you could try to get out with the kids. But I don't think you'd make it."

"I'll go alone," said Delda, rising. "Gussie can take care of you and Peter."

He nodded. "That's the only way. If we make Gussie understand that she must never come to where I can reach her or bring me anything I could use to get loose—" He thought a moment. "Is the file you used to sharpen the cleaver still in the kitchen?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Well, get it and the cleaver, too. Put them in the tool chest, and lock it and take the key with you. Find the hatchet, and put it in. The crowbar's leaning against the west side of the hog house. Throw it and the ax up on the porch roof."

"And I'll take the head?"

He nodded. "Hang it out nights, and wrap it up at sunrise."

Delda got up on the porch and started for the door. "I'll hurry,

Sam. I'll get to Saddler's as fast as ever I can. He's got a truck and will take me to the Forest Station and they'll—"

"Wait," said Sam sharply. "Stand still a minute, Delda. I think you can get to Saddler's in four or five days, but not if you hurry. If you crowd yourself, you'll fold up before you're half started. Go slow, and when you get tired, rest. Don't take a step after dark, but build a good fire against a down log. Take the 410. It will get you a squirrel or a grouse when you're on the mountain. Take one of the big gang hooks and some string. When you're on the river, you can tie the hook to a stick and snag yourself a squaw fish in any still pool."

She saw Sam's knife and matchbox lying outside the circle and stepped off the porch to pick them up.

"Take plenty of matches," said Sam. "Better take the blue comfort, too; it'll be cold nights. Take a little salt to flavor your food if you want. But that's all. Every ounce is going to weigh a ton."

Delda looked up the great canyon for a moment. "The times we walked out, I didn't pay too much mind to the way we went because you knew."

"It pretty much repeats," said Sam easily. "Like from here you can walk along the river until the cliff comes down at the rapids, so you go up the little canyon this side. Go clear to the main ridge and then along it. Skip the next two canyons; the third will take you back down to the river again." He thought for a moment. "There's four other places you'll have to climb around—five, if the river should rise." He paused.

Presently he thought of something else. "Whenever you have to leave the river, drink all the water you can hold. Never try to save time by climbing along the side of a canyon where there's been a slide and the rocks are lying loose. You'll slip pretty near as much as you gain, and there's danger of bringing the whole thing down on you."

Sam considered again. "If you come on a mountain lion or a bear, just stay where you are until it goes away. You'll likely get rim-rocked a few times—I mean, when you're coming down some canyon you'll find it ending in a cliff. Don't try to get down it, but go back up to the ridge and find another canyon. Remember you can't get clear lost as long as you keep coming back to the river." He smiled. "It flows right past Saddler's, so you're mortal certain to get there if you stick to it."

A half hour later Sam watched as Delda picked her way upstream along the river rocks. The rolled blue comfort was tied diagonally

across her back, and the 410 swung in her hand. At the first turn she waved, then disappeared.

Gussie sat on the porch, looking steadily at her father. Behind her, in his playpen, Peter banged on a tin pan.

Sam smiled at Gussie. "So you're going to be the mother in our home for a while."

"I can do it fine."

"Of course you can. But I was thinking. The thing is, we might make some changes that would be more fun. Suppose you didn't do any cooking in the house; you could set up two flat stones and cook right here in the yard where I could watch. Wouldn't that be fun?"

This didn't appear practical to Gussie. "What if it rains?"

"Oh, we could eat cold things until it cleared up."

"Peter ought to have his mush hot," said Gussie with authority. "He won't eat cold mush, even with more sugar."

"Well." Sam felt helpless. "The thing is, honey, I'd rather you wouldn't light any matches in the house. If a fire was to start, I couldn't do anything to help."

"I've lit the stove lots of times and the lamp, too, just like Mamma."

Sam's voice rose sharply. "Gussie, there won't be any lighting of matches in the house. Do you understand that?"

Gussie's lip quivered. "If I'm going to be the mother, then I ought to cook on the stove and light the lamps like a mother."

Sam gave in. "I suppose that's so. But, dear, our home and even our lives depend on you now. Be very careful of fire."

Gussie nodded. "Daddy," she asked, after looking steadily at him for a long moment, "what's the matter with you?"

"Why, nothing at all right now."

"But there's going to be?"

"I don't think so." He paused. "I just don't know, Gussie. I might get to acting very strange and wild. I just don't know." He pointed to the line with his whip. "Mamma told you about that?"

"She said it was a game; for me not to cross over it."

Sam shook his head. "No, it's not a game. It's dead serious. When you bring me food, put it in the aluminum pan, and when I see you coming with it, I'll go to the other side of the circle behind the tree. Then you put the pan on the line and get back."

"Suppose you don't go over to the other side of the circle?"

"Then you'll know I'm sick. I won't need any food then. And if I ever ask you to get me anything I could use to get loose with, you'll

know for certain I'm bad sick and you're not to mind a word I tell you."

Gussie shook her head in puzzlement. "If you get sick, are you going to die?"

"We won't worry about that now. Just remember never to bring me anything that would get me loose. And never, no matter what, come to where I can reach you."

Peter's pan rolled through the bars of the playpen, and Gussie got up to retrieve it. "I'd best get to sweeping; the house is a mess."

Sam sat down, his back against the pine. He tried to remember all he had ever heard about madness. Madmen were unnaturally strong; they raved in their strength and killed anything they could get at. Then there was the clever, scheming kind of madness. This would be the worst. Gussie would keep away if he got to raving, but suppose his madness didn't show—suppose it made him try to work a scheme on Gussie so he could get her.

Sam didn't think a madman would have to be very clever to work a scheme on his nine-year-old daughter.

He stood up and took a long look at the river. It didn't affect him, so he was still all right and it would be safe to do what he had to do. The sweat broke out on him as he called Gussie.

She came to the front door.

"You'd better sleep in Mamma and Daddy's room with Peter."

She nodded competently. "I've already moved my things in."

"Good girl. But I'm going to need your blankets and mattress out here. Suppose you can do it? Bring the things one at a time."

As she turned, Sam stopped her. "Gussie, remember what I said?"

"About the circle?"

"About the circle. Don't put anything down where I can reach it until I'm clear on the other side away from you."

Gussie nodded and ran inside. When she came out with the pillow and the first blanket, Sam walked away. But Gussie dropped her armful on the line before Sam had reached the other side of the circle. She hurried back into the cabin. Sam took two long steps toward the bedding. But when she came out with the remaining blankets, she was too intent on her job to look at Sam. She dropped them and went back for the mattress.

Sam could hear her having trouble with it. She appeared in the doorway, where the mattress stuck, but she worried it loose, got it across the porch and into the yard.

By now Sam was standing by the blankets. He held out his left hand. "Here you come, Gussie!"

She brought it directly to him, red-faced and panting.

Sam's hand closed tightly on her arm; then he struck her savagely three times across the legs with his whip.

Gussie screamed. She stood stock-still, staring at him in wide-eyed disbelief, before she ran shrieking into the cabin.

He yelled after her, "I told you never to come where I could reach you!" He then flung down the whip and went to the other side of the pine, leaned his forearm against it, and cried.

The sun was in the center of the canyon when, without looking in Sam's direction, Gussie came out and took Peter inside for his lunch.

When he saw her come out with the aluminum pan and a cup, Sam went quickly to the other side of the circle. Only then did Gussie come to the line, and the moment she put down the food she returned to the cabin. Sam told her the lunch smelled wonderful, but Gussie ignored him and went inside, closing the door.

Later Sam saw the flash of a white cloth over the front window; Gussie was industriously cleaning it while Peter, probably, was taking his nap. A feeling of love and pride came to Sam. Gussie was so like Delda. When he and Delda had a falling out—which was rare; though it happened—she would ignore him and turn furiously to housecleaning.

Delda. Sam knew where she would be about now. She'd be a mile up the canyon from the river, crawling over boulders as she worked her way to the ridge. Every hundred feet she'd have to stop and lie there until her breath came back and the numb ache left the front of her thighs. She'd hear her heart in her ears like the sound of a far-away gas-engine pump. He hoped she'd drunk deeply of the river—there'd be no water on the ridge where she'd stop tonight.

Gussie came out on the porch and set to cleaning that side of the window.

Sam called her softly. Her hand stopped instantly in its sweep across the glass, but she did not turn. "I had to hurt you, so's you'd remember about the circle."

She left the window and came to the edge of the porch, but she did not look up and her voice was barely audible. "While Peter's sleeping, maybe I ought to catch us some trout."

Sam agreed heartily. Gussie smiled slightly; then hurried into the cabin for the fly swatter. Sam watched as she stalked grasshoppers

for bait in the sunny place by the henhouse. She looked a little like a grasshopper herself when she hunched.

After supper Sam watched tensely as she carried the lamp from the kitchen to the bedroom. He could tell from the shadows when she was putting on Peter's sleeping suit and lifting him into his crib. Then the lamp went out. Sam sighed with relief.

He slept part of the night, then woke with a dream of burning his hand on the lamp. He felt the fleshy part below the base of the little finger where the toothmarks were. The place didn't seem swollen and it wasn't very sore, but when he clenched his fist, a spark of pain flashed in his armpit.

Sam went cold and hollow with fear. In his mind he could see what was going on: two tiny streams colored red and carrying madness in little pulsing throbs came from the bite holes. They met at the wrist and, twining themselves like a bean vine, were growing up inside his arm. When they reached the shoulder, they would turn inward and find his neck and keep on growing until they were in his head. There they would continue to grow and curl round and round into a great coiled knot of madness.

He got up and walked his circle for the rest of the night. And at sunrise he still walked, only now he was careful not to look at the river as he came to that part of his circle. Then, in spite of himself, he did see the water. Nothing happened. Sam stared at the river for a long time.

After the children woke and Gussie had called good morning to him before taking Peter into the kitchen, Sam felt better. The pain wasn't any worse. Maybe it was nothing after all but the sort of blood poisoning you can get from a cut or a splinter. He knew what to do about that.

So all that day Sam lay with his arm in the roasting pan filled with warm water in which a three pound sack of Epsom salts had been dissolved. Every hour or so he carried the pan to the line so that Gussie could take it into the kitchen and reheat it. That night, after she was asleep, he continued to soak his arm, and the next morning there was no pain at all, no matter how hard he shut his fist. But just to be sure, he and Gussie continued the treatment all that day.

At sundown a storm began. From the lightning and the time it took to hear the thunder, the storm was centered six or seven miles up the canyon. The rain was heavy.

Gussie brought him the tarp and the wicker clothes basket. He

laid the heavy canvas over his bed, stuck his head inside the basket, and pulled the canvas over that. He'd keep dry enough.

In the morning it would be the fourth day since Delda left; most of her hard struggle would be over now—with any luck. He wondered where she would be tonight in this storm. Maybe coming down that little canyon beyond Steelhead Rapids. He tried to think of places around there where she could shelter from the storm and have a fire, but nothing came to mind.

The morning was clear. As always now, Sam moved to the river-bank the first thing after he woke up and looked steadily at the water for a time. It didn't bring on any fear this time either, but Sam was puzzled. He couldn't understand why the river should have dropped a good two feet overnight. If anything, it should have risen because of the heavy rain.

All the forenoon Sam kept an eye on the river. It was still falling, and by now bottom rocks had appeared that he had never seen before, even in the driest summer. By noon the river was half gone.

Then the reason for the falling river came to Sam with the force of sudden panic. He yelled for Gussie, and the urgency of his voice brought her from the kitchen, dragging Peter by the hand.

"Get a rock or something and smash the tool chest and bring me the hammer and a cold chisel. Hurry, Gussie, the water's coming! The whole river will be down on us!"

She looked at him without saying a word. She began to cry. Pushing Peter ahead of her, she went inside the cabin and shut the door. Sam knew his terrible mistake. He had been excited and had asked for tools. He should have explained that somewhere upriver a big slide had occurred. The river was damming up behind it, and when it did break through, it would come down the canyon in a solid wall.

The river was still falling.

Sam made his voice as kindly and as pleading as he could, calling for Gussie again and again to please come out on the porch, just for a minute. Finally the door did open the width of Gussie's face, but she did not come out. Sam asked her to look at the river and see how low it was, and he calmly explained about the slide and the great danger. But even as he talked, he could see that she was not taking in anything he said. She just stared at him with horrified eyes, her small white hands squirming together at her waist. And the need to make her understand was so very great that, in spite of himself, Sam's voice rose. He was shouting orders at her before he realized



it. He made his voice quiet again. "Please, darling—I'm not sick. I'm scared!" He could tell she was going to speak, and paused.

Her voice was very low. "You told Mamma you'd be scared of water."

"The river!" yelled Sam. "The river is coming down on us! I won't ask you to help me get loose, but you take Peter and get up on the hill above the root cellar. Please, please—"

She began sobbing as she turned her face away and slowly closed the door.

Anyone seeing Sam now would have been sure he was mad. He was on all fours, frantically clawing a hole. It was an hour before he got through the coarse river gravel to a boulder top. Another hour passed in widening the hole until his searching fingers at last found a rock suited to his purpose. It was heavy, about ten inches by four. Stretching the chain over the boulder top, Sam set to pounding one of the links with his rock.

And as he pounded he didn't feel right about what he was doing. If he got free, the madness might come on him, but then the river might come, too. Sam didn't know if the river or himself was the greater danger to the children. One thing: he was sure he was all right now. Then Sam began to wonder how he knew this. Suppose he was mad now; suppose he only imagined about the river. How could he really tell?

He stopped pounding and considered throwing the rock outside the circle. Then it seemed to him that if he were mad he couldn't be wondering if he were. "As long as I think I might be crazy," he murmured, "I'm probably all right." He fell to pounding again. Once he was loose, he'd take the kids to a safe place as fast as he could and chain himself up again. If the river took the house, there would still be food that Gussie could get to in the root cellar.

Several times during the afternoon Sam saw that Gussie was watching him from the front window. He also saw that she had his Winchester. She'd never fired the rifle, but Sam was sure she knew how it worked.

By night the river was about one third normal size and didn't seem to be going lower. The dam was holding longer than Sam would have thought possible. He knew that if the river started to rise slowly it would mean that the water was finding a way around or over the dam. It wouldn't come all at once then. But the river wasn't rising so far as Sam could see.

He continued to pound. By dark the link felt slightly flat to his fin-

gers. He was making headway at beating it through. Then Gussie took the lamp into the bedroom, but after she had put Peter in his crib, the lamp still burned. Sam could tell from the shadows on the wall that Gussie was sitting up on the bed. The shadow of the Winchester was there, too.

Along in the night the pounding rock split, and for a moment Sam felt hopeless. But one piece was still pretty heavy, and there was now a sharp edge. After pounding with it awhile, Sam could feel that the edge was making little nicks across the flat place in the link. He couldn't see where he was hitting, but his pounding motions were so well set by now that he thought he was hitting right most of the time.

It grew light, and as the western cliff took on an orange glow, the link was almost paper thin. Then Sam heard a faint, eddying roar far up the canyon. Here it came! The roar swelled, died down to almost nothing, then came up again, stronger, starting echoes from the canyon walls. Sam pounded frantically. The link was cut through now, in a thin line.

Then a bright piece flaked off, and the crack was a quarter of an inch wide. Sam placed the next link across the crack and pulled against the pine tree with all his strength. The link snapped through, and Sam was free.

The roaring was very loud in the canyon as Sam ran into the cabin. Gussie was asleep, snoring, the cocked rifle beside her. She woke when Sam picked her up, screamed in terror as she saw him. But by then Sam had Peter under the other arm and was headed for the back door.

He got them up the hill above the root cellar and let Gussie go. She ran off a little way and stopped, looking at him, ready to run again. Peter was still half asleep, and Sam put him down.

There was no longer any roaring sound.

And the river—the river had risen during the night to normal. There couldn't be any wall of water now.

But the roaring that only a moment ago had filled the canyon with echoing sound—Sam couldn't understand at all. He stared at the river below him and as far up as the bend.

The golden light from the western cliff bathed the Finelace homestead with bright radiance; it was the time he and Delda always woke.

Then Delda called his name, long and sweet. He whirled. She was running toward him in a slant up the hill. Behind her walked two

men, one wearing a forest ranger's uniform, the other carrying a doctor's bag. And behind them, in the middle of the wheatfield, was one of those flying machines that can go straight up and down.

"It's all right!" called Delda as she came on. "You won't get it, Sam—the doctor says so! There's time to give you shots!"

The doctor, standing below with the ranger, heard her. He smiled up at Sam, nodded, and lifted his bag in a confident manner.

Delda and Sam met and clung. After a moment Gussie came to them, pried one of Sam's fingers from Delda's back, and held on to it. Peter was making hungry sounds.

### **SOLUTION TO THE MARCH "UNSOLVED":**

George Moore was the player falsely accused. It was Chuck North who made five turnovers on purpose and thereby contributed to his team's defeat. Incidentally, it was he who sent the anonymous letter with the false accusation.

| PLAYER/POSIT.       | TOWN       | SCHOOL   | PTS | REBS | T'OVERS |
|---------------------|------------|----------|-----|------|---------|
| Frank Jones/center  | Petersburg | Carson   | 12  | 6    | 0       |
| Al Kempe/forward    | Quincy     | Gonzola  | 16  | 5    | 1       |
| Don Iverson/forward | Sugsbury   | Burwell  | 10  | 7    | 3       |
| Bert Hall/guard     | Taylortown | Darton   | 22  | 8    | 4       |
| George Moore/guard  | Olmstead   | Ardmore  | 15  | 2    | 3       |
| Chuck North/subst.  | Ulster     | Farragut | 2   | 0    | 5       |
| Earl Lagler/subst.  | Rawville   | Elgin    | 6   | 1    | 2       |

# BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



**M**ary Willis Walker's first three novels earned her awards and outstanding reviews. The return of true-crime Texan reporter Molly Cates in **All the Dead Lie Down** (Doubleday, \$22.95) should continue the trend as Walker combines two cases with very different time frames. In a way, the old, agonizing case of Molly's father's alleged suicide when she was a teenager stopped the clock for her. She has never recovered emotionally from that betrayal, never believed that he killed himself, and has never truly trusted anyone since. The second plotline involves a horrifying act of political terrorism; the clock is literally ticking as Molly stumbles on the truth and then tries to prevent the slaughter. Above it all there's Molly, tough and unflinching and occasionally reckless, competent and compassionate, yet merciless in her self-evaluations. She's a complex character, fascinating to watch in action.

Bibliophiles should enjoy Marianne Macdonald's **Death's Autograph** (St. Martin's, \$22.95) and its engaging heroine, Dido Hoare, a plucky British antiquarian bookseller. It all begins with a campaign of mild terror that all too soon escalates to murder. It doesn't take Sherlock Holmes to figure out that this probably has something to do with Dido's charming but ne'er-do-well ex-husband Davey, who, not coincidentally, has just dropped back into the picture. Teamed with her retired academic father, Barnabas, Dido must figure out what it is that someone wants, just exactly where the item is, and then how to get rid of it before she loses her business or worse. Dido is fun and Barnabas is surprisingly quickwitted, which gives this clever hot-potato plot the lighthearted feel of a wacky caper.

For those of you who have taken to mysteries via Sue Grafton and her contemporaries, may I suggest a dip into some of the golden

oldies? Dover Mystery Classic Series has reissued some top-notch gems in trade paperback with an irresistible retail price of \$2.00 each. Try **The Circular Staircase**, Mary Roberts Rinehart's classic tale of a spinster's summer rental turning into Hell House, and **Trent's Last Case**, E. C. Bentley's story of an amateur upper-class detective in pre-World War I Britain who falls in love with his prime suspect. You'll be transported back in time and probably outwitted by the superior plotting of two masters.

Ann Ripley's **Death of a Political Plant** (Bantam, \$20) is the third to star Louise Eldridge, the Washington area public TV's horticulturalist and avid gardener. A college sweetheart arrives as a houseguest just as Louise's husband is sent out of the country on a hush-hush government mission. No problem: as a government official's wife Louise is a well-trained hostess. Anyway, it soon becomes clear that good old Jay is deep into his work, a big investigative article about which he's being very secretive. Louise is a sympathetic character, and gardeners will be delighted to find little gardening treatises sprinkled throughout the story.

**Shadow Walk** (Putnam, \$23.95) by Jane Waterhouse reprises the protagonist of the author's earlier novels, the bestselling true-crime author Garner Quinn. When the novel opens, Garner is definitely burned out, practically in hiding with her teenage daughter in a beach house she's renovating, trying to recuperate from a disappointing love affair and perhaps one too many close encounters with violent death. But there's one old crime case that can get her attention and pull her back into investigation and danger. That's the mention of Gordon Spangler, a mild-mannered New Jersey suburban husband who murdered his entire family twenty-seven years earlier and then utterly disappeared. One of the dead children was his teenage daughter Lara, Garner's best friend. Waterhouse wraps her heroine in the glamour of a richly successful writing career, and then has her doggedly open up a painful chapter in her own young life to get at the truth (which is probably why she is such a great true-crime writer in the first place!). The result is suspense in the tradition of Mary Higgins Clark.

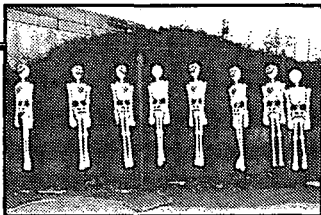
If you like legal thrillers, pick up Malcolm C. MacPherson's **Deadlock** (Simon & Schuster, \$23). The highly publicized San Francisco trial of an illegal Chinese alien for the murder of the beautiful young granddaughter of a local billionaire and senator is about to begin when the judge receives an anonymous note that the real killer is sitting on the jury. Worse for Judge Daniel Barr, he believes that his

own father, a respectable retired jurist, was instrumental in seeing that Daniel was chosen to preside over this particular trial. But why? Dad won't say, nor will his old buddy, the bishop. It's a neat premise, and MacPherson makes Daniel a sympathetic character whom readers will root for as he undertakes his own personal investigation, leading to a shocking conclusion. Enjoy!

Margaret Lawrence follows up her highly praised first novel with **Blood Red Roses** (Avon, \$23), continuing the compelling saga of Hannah Trevor, midwife and single mother, as she struggles to maintain her identity and independence in rural Maine in the decade following the American Revolution. When a poor woman and her small children are murdered, followed by the murder of the woman's common-law husband, no one is more shocked by his identity than Hannah, who quickly becomes the major suspect. Lawrence weaves together the stories of several families in a community struggling under burdensome postwar taxes and a dangerous political backlash that is replacing Tory scapegoats with anyone of wealth and property. But the richness in the tale is in the multiple backstories of hardship, cruelty, and the harsh treatment of women in that era. Fascinating, albeit somber, reading.

# THE STORY THAT WON

The November Mystery was won by Diane C. Wisconsin. Honorable Campbell of Tullahoma, ling of Ann Arbor, Michigan; Alaska, Texas; Alfred to, California; Amy Cry-Maryland; LaDonna Lane Grigsby of Broken Arrow, Oklahoma; Lynn Chatman of Houston, Texas; Frank W. Stones III of Afton, Wyoming; Treva Myatt of Toledo, Ohio; Janet Hayward Burnham of Bethel, Vermont; and Kathy Chencharik of South Royalston, Massachusetts.



ous Photograph contest Perrone of Franklin, mentions go to Wes Tennessee; Robert Kesigan; Orle Johnston of W. Cross of Sacramenter of Gaithersburg,

Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

## ALLEMANDE LEFT & RIGHT by Diane C. Perrone

Squiggy focused his camera on the skeleton octet, each securely mounted on a T-bar. Why had Freddy sent him here?

A wealthy eccentric, Freddy hired Squiggy often to photograph his art gallery and car dealership openings, his ball club's pre-game parties, and lots of square dance benefits, many occurring at the same time as unsolved robberies. Squiggy's pictures confirmed Freddy's alibi. Only Squiggy and Freddy knew how Freddy's image got in those pictures—the miracle of modern technology! And now Freddy was dead.

Squiggy reread Freddy's e-mail. He hadn't noticed before; the subject was "allemande left and right." The dateline was two hours before Freddy died.

As the pictures began to darken in his developing tank—first the hearts, then the faces, then the railroad trestle—Squiggy whooped, "Railroad!" He wrote numbers according to the sequence of similar faces, raced to the train station, and found locker number 12131. Then he entered the numbers according to the direction the skeletons faced: 1 left, 2 right, back to 0, 3 left, back to 0. The lock opened! Inside were a dozen envelopes stuffed with thousand dollar bills and a note:

*Squiggy—One last favor. Take an envelope for yourself, give the rest to my kids. They deserve something. They didn't have me—always working. What for? Taxes? Payroll? Alimony? Recession? Strike? The big C? No time to rebuild. I danced as fast as I could, but someone kept speeding up the music. Now it's my call. Do-si-do!*

—Freddy



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| (11) \$72.00  | (12) \$72.00  | (13) \$72.00  | (14) \$72.00  | (15) \$72.00  |
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**HOW DO YOU COUNT WORDS?** Name and address must be included in counting the number of words in your ad. Each initial or number counts as 1 word. City and state count as 1 word each. (Garden City, New York, counts as 2 words.) Zip codes are 1 word. (Mark 1. Holly, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020 count as 8 words.) Phone numbers are 1 word. Abbreviations such as COD, FOB, PO, USA, 7x10, 35mm count as 1 word. PO Box 145 counts as 2 words.  
**PLEASE MAKE CHECKS PAYABLE TO DELL MAGAZINES.**

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# CLASSIFIED MARKETPLACE

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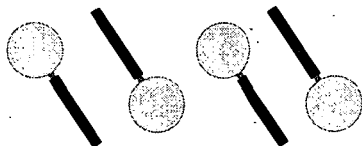
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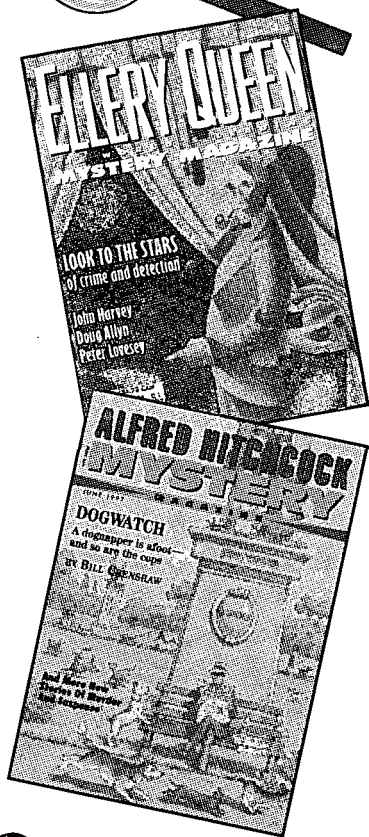
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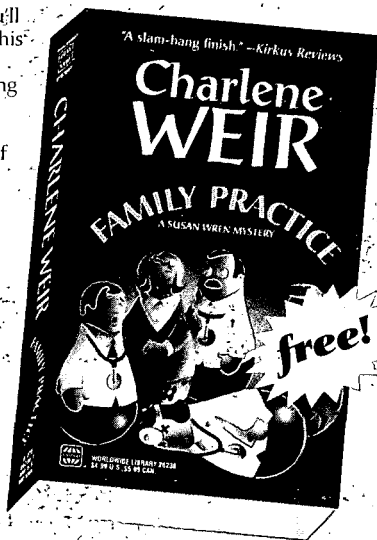
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